Writers in Progress

A collection of essays by Basic Writing students

1995-1996

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Introduction

What does it mean to write? Many spend their lives delving into that question without a definitive answer. Any of us who do write may have partial answers, but certainly not whole ones. We can hold the mystery of writing to the light and turn it around in our hands, never quite seeing or comprehending its essence. We search for answers in the writings of others, wondering what clicked and flew for them. We fill pages with our own words, sometimes wobbly--other times luminescently true--in schools, libraries, and cafés; at computers, in notebooks, and on scraps of paper; for class, for money, for love, for no reason at all.

Another year's worth of English 4400 Basic Writing students has just joined our ranks; what follows are some of their ideas about writing. I wonder if this year's classes have been as surprised by some of their answers as we in the Writing Center have. When I began here last October, I was all gung-ho to be a great encourager and motivator to the students I'd be assisting. Well, as you can probably guess, I have learned much more than I have taught. I have read of the ugly, the glad, the fearsome, the sorrowful -- sometimes all in the course of a day. I have learned things from the life-tales of others that I will probably never experience myself. I have read of feelings and sensations so powerful I would almost call them inexpressible -- except that there they were, in grey dot matrix print, making themselves quite clear to me.

So I (we, perhaps--but I can only speak for myself) have had to stretch my concept of writing yet again, to include a sealife-clogged power plant canal, a tanning factory, a little boy who died too young, and a Turkish café--among other things. Writers in Progress may feature students categorized as "basic" or "developmental," but such labels signify, if anything, less experience with the medium of writing. What this work does not lack, as you will see, is power, wit, and sophistication. The writers included here have squeezed blood out of a stone, brought life to paper, and made ink dance. And that is no small accomplishment.

Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta
The Writing Center

The Audubon Bird Sanctuary

by Maria Deaven

It was late fall and there was still frost on the ground from the night before. The sky was gray and overcast, the pond skinned with ice. Most of the trees were bare and the leaves slippery underfoot. High grasses were weaving in the breeze. Chickadees were landing on my hand that was filled with hulled sunflower seeds. They take one seed at a time and fly off to the nearest tree to eat the tasty snack. Soon they will be back for another. Again, you feel the delicate little feet on your hand; the bird is so close you can see the tiny beak that can hold only one seed. Looking back at me were coal black wary eyes, ready to fly off at the slightest movement. I stood like a statue to see the soft black feathers on its head, the tail and wing tips. The body looks velvety, more cream colored than white. I wondered if I could take a chance and feel its feathers, but did not want to frighten this little creature.

My next visitor was a blue gray nuthatch. It is a little larger, sleeker shaped bird. Its beak is longer and thicker. It still takes only one seed from my hand. There is not enough time to observe that bird. It is hungry and only here to get a quick snack and leave.

I walked a little closer to a beautiful spruce. It was alive with birds chirping and singing. They seemed more comfortable with my presence, since their hiding place was so near. Soon, my one hand was too small for all the visitors and I filled my other hand with seeds to satisfy all the newcomers.

The titmouse came for a morsel. She was a small brownish gray bird with a feathertuft on her head and a whitish belly. No movement went unnoticed by this bird. The gold finch, a small, greenish yellow bird with a black cap and wings was quick to return for more to eat.

I could have stayed for hours. All I had to do was refill my hands with seeds from my pockets. The only bird I could not entice was the cardinal. I had seen one close, after he hit the glass door at my house and died. He did not have that vivid red color you see when he was sitting on the feeder or on the tree. Maybe next time he will land on my hand for me to get a closer look.

My feet started getting cold, so I left some seed for the birds and walked the trail past the swamp, field and marsh. There were more birds looking for an easy meal and a new beggar, a striped chipmunk, on a large rock. He was fun to watch, too shy to come to my hands when I bent down. I put nuts and seeds on the rock. He stuffed his little pouches as fast as he could. The slightest movement and he squeaked and ran off, his little tail in the air.

I got up to leave, but spotted more shiny black eyes peeping from between the rocks. Quickly, I emptied my pockets. I froze in place to watch them clean the

pretend tables of every last treat. By then I was ready for a warm place, something to eat and a hot cup of tea. I walked back to my car and left the peaceful place behind.

Kittery

by Bob Ota

My in-laws live in the small town of Kittery, Maine. My first thoughts of Kittery were of busy, expansive outlets and huge shopping malls where busloads of people are running from store to store trying to catch a great bargain. Endless streams of colorful cars and busses show us their heat waves as they inch along, trying to get to their favorite outlets. This is the longest stretch of road we must endure before we get to our turnoff. Once we make that turn, my in laws live about two miles from the hustle and bustle of this mall madness. In fact, they live on a small dirt road that leads to a peninsula that juts out into a large flowing tidal creek.

If I ever wanted to build a dream house this would be the place. They have 10 acres of prime land which pretty much takes up most of that peninsula. It's funny how two miles makes a big difference. Their house is a large, expandable cape, painted antique white with light blue shutters. There's an attached family room with a three stall garage with an apartment upstairs. As you snake your way up the gravel driveway, the house stands out of the trees. The hazy sunbeams filter through the tall pines, shining softly in places on the roof and in the front yard, making the scene almost out of focus. Just behind the house, you can seen the tidal creek, its water shimmering from the bright sunlight and the gentle breezes.

This place always reminds me of a picture postcard from Maine. The first half of the point is covered by the tallest pine trees I have ever seen. They must have stood here untouched for years gone by. Some look like distorted giant cactuses with huge arms that form a pose a bodybuilder would use to show his massive biceps. The sweet, sticky sap oozes down its arms and trunk, looking like the perspiration that would trickle down during a bodybuilder's posing routine.

Their house is always surrounded by shade, which is great when we come back hot from the beach because it's always cooler here. Also, the soft pine needles make a cushiony walk to the house. The other half of the point does not have any trees; it's all semi-tall, soft green grass.

Sometimes in the early morning we take a leisurely stroll out to the point. You can see where deer have bedded down for the night. You can tell by the odd flat kidney shapes in the grass. Now as the sun rises, the tidal creek begins to rise with the tide and brings the salty sea air--thick, with almost a musty smell. It almost clings to you, like some aromatic smoke. Off in the distance you hear the channel marker clanging to warn some boater he may be off course. And of course, you hear an occasional sound of an anxious shopper blowing a horn.

But when the tidal creek recedes, it exposes another look at the creek. Where I thought would be marine life scurrying for cover, there is none. All that is shown is mud, a thick dark mass that smells of dead things that forgot to go with the tide. The only thing that holds life are the large, oval-shaped rock piles that are scattered about without design. The only life I see are the crabs scurrying across the mucky ooze in search of food, leaving behind their little footprints. Seagulls now patrol the shoreline, looking for some unfortunate crab who wandered too far from the tidal pool.

By now the high tide is coming, the water slowly rising, bringing a new start as it flows. Kayakers scramble to get on the water as if they are in some great rush to be the first. They really do stand out with their brightly colorful outfits. Screaming yellow seems to be the choice, like some poisonous tropical fish telling others to stay away. High tide does bring activity. You'll see small sailboats which do well because of the constant breezes. Their tall white sails dot the channel as if some gigantic leaf cutter ants are lost and running about. Sometimes you can see schools of herring jumping up and down as if they were getting out of each other's way to gain that frontal position to lead the school. They really should watch where they are going because they will end up in a dead end creek channel and will jump to their deaths when the tides recede. Schools of bluefish will mistakenly drive up this channel, which we can tell by the small boats chasing and casting into the boiling water. You can hear the excitement and laughter over the water, the fisherman slapping each other off the back, taking in as many as they can.

At night time when the sun goes down, the scene becomes almost romantic. The skies turn a fiery orange as if the gods lit the clouds afire. The grass comes to life with the symphony of crickets playing their songs. The once gently blowing wind now seems to have left for some other place. Without the sun, the air seems to change like someone fooling with the thermostat, putting it to low. When the stars come out, it really is beautiful at the point. They twinkle like tiny Christmas lights. The seagulls bob on top of the water; they seem to be asleep. It's absolutely quiet now, no boats, no cars' horns, just the clanging of the distant channel marker.

This is what I love about Kittery. When you are here you seem to be in some sort of time warp. Life seems to slow down here, so you slow down, and you watch life pass you by in a crowded bus headed for another day of busy shopping. There's really nothing exotic about Kittery, it's just a small town with simple sights. It's these simple things you forget, like watching the sailboats or breathing the salty air, because of your daily 9 to 5 grind and those tight schedules you must keep. If I ever have a chance to live here, you will see me and my family out on our own point, enjoying the simple things of life in Kittery . . .

The Trail of Terror

by Keith Kady

Early that evening the violent buzz from my alarm startled me into consciousness. The squealing tore through my head, as if someone were running their fingernails down a chalkboard. Once I had become totally awake, I realized it was over. I made it through a night of hell!

It all started two nights ago when I was asked to do a canal cleaning for Boston Edison. The pay was really high, so I agreed to do it. I had never done this kind of work before so I didn't know what was in store for me.

That evening I drove to Mystic Station. When I drove up to the gate, the security guard said, "State your business."

"I am here for a canal cleaning," I said. He grunted then allowed me to sign in. He told me to park my car and walk towards the stacks.

I walked down a narrow paved street between two giant buildings. The one on the right had to have been at least ten stories high and had BOSTON EDISON written in bold letters near the top. I soon came upon two giant smoke stacks at least five times higher than the building. The canal was just a couple steps away.

The canal that we were cleaning was one of the largest, about 700 feet long. This pipe originates in the power plant and goes under the ocean to supply the massive boilers with cooling water.

At one end of the massive concrete-encased pipe there is a giant room which has steel mesh from floor to ceiling to help prevent much of the sea life from getting sucked down the giant belly of the blackened canal. The screen plays a major role in keeping the sea life out. The rate of flow is so great that clams, mussels and other life get sucked in past the screen and stick to the walls. After a few months of this, the pipe's opening closes up.

A crane came in and dropped a concrete slab in front of the opening. The canal was drained in a couple of hours. It was now time to get the wooden scrapers and get to work. We were led to a metal rusted ladder in a building full of heavy equipment, pipes and gauges. The ladder led down to a steel grate landing, where the opening of the canal was.

The hole leading into the black pit was no wider than my waist. I grabbed the first rung of the ladder and worked my way down. The slime from the sides of the hole stuck to my body. I was almost overcome by the thick stench from the decayed sea life. The smell was so bad, it was like eating a seafood dinner that had been sitting around in the sun for a couple of weeks.

I picked up my light and shined it down the heart of the canal. It was disgusting! The seaweed and algae hung down from the ceiling with hundreds of spider-like creatures crawling up the walls. Chills shot down my spine. With every step I took, the quicksand-like slime engulfed my feet.

I was working very diligently that night, scraping the walls of the 700 foot long trail of terror. The sweat from my brow dripped down my face and into my mouth, tasting like rotten decayed animals. I felt a thump on my hard hat, then had the feeling of something digging its teeth and claws into my flesh. I grabbed it, threw it to the ground, and dug the heel of my boot into its weakened shell. The creature made a long winding squealing that echoed through the tunnel. After half the night had gone by, the hard part was almost over. The scraping was done. I would be on the second crew that would suck the deceased crustaceans up. The sea life that we had scraped off the ceiling and walls was now in a huge continuous pile running though the whole canal.

Boston Edison brought in a vacuum truck to finish the job. I had seen it before, while climbing down into the pit. The truck was the size of an eighteen-wheeler, which had the capacity to hold thousands of pounds of sludge. A hose as wide as my thigh got passed down to us. There were three of us working in a team. When the vacuum turned on, the sound was horrifying. It was so loud, it ripped through my head. The suction was so powerful, the second I stuck the vac hose to the mound of dead creatures, it pulled me in. The force was incredible.

A couple hours into the wee hours of the morning I was getting really tired. My whole body had been saturated by sweat and bacteria-filled, salty, slimy sea water.

When I placed the hose a couple inches away from the pile of dead carcasses, it sent hair-curling jolts through my fatigued body. The sound echoed off the walls, giving me a splitting headache. My eyes had become fixed on the barrel of the hose. It seemed like mounds of creatures were being sucked into the vac at tremendous speeds. I fell into a trance.

I snapped out of it with the horrifying sound of screaming. The hose stuck to my partner's chest. The third guy was nowhere in sight, and my screams could not be heard over the ear-piercing sound of the vacuum. I dove to my knees with slime splashing my face. I wrapped my arm around the hose and pressed against his chest with my other hand. I struggled with all my might but couldn't budge it. I was told if this happened, you only have a few seconds to get it off. The vac is so powerful it will implode every vein and artery in the section of your body it is stuck to. I reached into my back pocket and pulled my knife out. I flipped the blade open and stabbed it into the hose. I sawed the hose as fast as I could. As I looked up and into his dark eyes, I could see intense fear. I was trying my hardest to save his life. I then managed to release the pressure enough to pry it off his chest.

I helped him up and walked him a couple hundred feet to the entrance. I had pulled the vac off him just in time. Fortunately, he had no permanent damage.

I went back to work. I worked real hard the rest of the morning, and in time we had finished. It had been one of the most exhausting and disgusting experiences of my young life. I was the first one to climb out of the blackened pit. As I peeped my head through the opening, the light from the sun blinded me. It was truly the best feeling of my life.

It must have been a cool 60 degrees, and I was loving it. As I walked over to the harbor, the steel grated fence prevented me from sitting on the rocks. The view was spectacular. The sun was glistening off an eighty foot sail boat with all its sails at full mast. As I stared into the horizon, I asked myself one question: Was it really worth it?

The House That Brings Back Memories

by Maria L. Romero

It was a hot and humid afternoon. As I drove down the street in Juana Diaz, Puerto Rico, all was peaceful and quiet. Everything was still except for a passing breeze that gently moved the branches of the trees. Further down I stopped in front of a house that caught my attention, stepped out of my car, and stood admiring this perfect house. The walls were beige with two pillars on the side and brown trim at the top. The edges, the porch, the steps, and the small path that led to a gate, swept clean of falling leaves, made it look safe, secure, and well kept. I could smell the scent of roses coming from a flower bed.

At the gate there was a tall, slender, and pleasant-looking lady. She appeared to be in her thirties, her face tanned and her black hair which moved gently with the rhythm of the breeze thick and full. She reached to open the gate, which creaked on its rusty hinges. She stepped down three cement steps to the sidewalk to meet four girls, vibrant and full of youthful joy. They must have been coming home from school because they were carrying bookbags and lunchboxes and were all wearing olive and navy checkered jumpers with vivid white blouses. One of the girls was chubby, and her hair was stylish in two ponytails with blue bows that accented her coffee-colored hair.

The girls greeted the lady with kisses and hugs, and then she opened and closed the squeaking gate, making the noise again. As they all walked in along the small path that was built with white tiles, they climbed two steps to the porch where they passed an old, brick-colored sofa that seemed neglected. The paint on the metal frame was peeling off and had rusted. The plastic cushions had torn pieces and a rip. Through the open door, I saw the girls go into a room as the lady scurried in front of them and into the the kitchen. "I am sure you're hungry. I'll get you snacks," I heard the lady say.

The girls came out, no longer in their uniforms but wearing playclothes. Three of the girls had brightly colored shirts and short pants and the other wore a blue jumper dress with pockets at the front. They sat comfortably in what seemed to be the living room. The small hallway that led to the living room looked cool and pleasant, a relief from the overwhelming humidity outside. As they watched television, suddenly the lady came from the kitchen carrying packages of chocolate chip cookies and cold red fruit punch in clear plastic cups. "Here you go, girls, and after you finish, you may go outside and play." The girls' faces lighted up with happiness as they ate their snacks and drank their refreshing drinks. While they watched television, I could see family pictures on top of the wood console television. There was a family portrait in a silver frame and two pictures in wood frames. One was a school picture and the other was of a girl in a dancing costume.

Everything in the living room was reflected in a large brass antique mirror with scrolls down the sides which was hanging from one of the walls.

Their snacks finished, the girls came running out across the front porch, down the front steps, and into an open garage on the side of the house. They were all screaming and yelling to one another, "I want to be a singer," "I want to dance," "I want to be first!" The garage had six metal poles, three on each side, making it look like an open stage. Each girl rushed and grabbed a pole, danced, sang, and played around, like ballerinas each doing a private performance. One girl stopped and ran across the yard, towards the back of the house, passing a huge avocado tree full of blooming avocados. She then stopped and sat on an old, rusty water pump and started motioning like she was riding a horse. She lifted her hand as if she was striking a horse and she was a gallant horse rider. The other girls joined her. Next to the avocado tree there was a red playhouse with a white porch. The tree served as a huge protective shadow over the playhouse. They went into the playhouse, and my attention was drawn back into the house, where the lady was in the kitchen cooking. I could smell and almost taste the aroma of what could be rice with beans. The scents of cilantro, oregano, spices, and marinated chicken being fried filled the house.

These familiar scents always bring back memories of Juana Diaz. In my mind I can still hear the girls giggling, laughing, and singing in the background. I can move closer to the house and touch the gate, cold and rusty, that now sits open. I can stare at the small path that meets the house. This memory makes me feel warm, comfortable, secure, and at home, because the girl with the ponytails and the blue bows accenting her coffee-colored hair was--and is--me.

The Maiden Club

by Cenk Tuncok

About six months after I learned to play bridge, I first decided to go to this place called "Cafe Hemsen," which was better known between bridge players in Istanbul as "The Maiden Club." The reason for having such an unusual name for a cafe was the players' lousy record probably in the last ten years or so. Although they were regarded very highly by a lot of people, none of the Maiden Club players had won a first place in a nationwide bridge championship for quite a long time. It was not too hard to guess why people referred to Cafe Hemsen as Maiden Club after all.

It was June of 1991 and I was headed towards Cafe Hemsen that Saturday afternoon for the first time. I had to walk a half mile after I got off the Bosphorus passenger ship which I took twice every workday for the university. As soon as I took a couple of turns to get through the open market area full of vegetable and fish stands, butchers, grocery stores, fast food places and all kinds of other stores, I noticed the quite remarkable smell they created together with a very high level of noise which was impossible to ignore. When I got out of the open market area, I was on one of those dirty narrow side streets that always has piles of trash bags ripped open by the street cats and dogs searching for food. Since the trash bags from narrow streets didn't get collected on time by the garbage trucks, they stayed wide open, producing a strong, distinct smell until somebody couldn't stand it and took the bags to the main street sidewalks. These trash bag piles lined up near the sidewalk were actually quite an important characteristic for these streets. Whichever part of the world I am in, I would certainly recognize those streets just from their smell.

Finally, I took my last turn and saw the entrance to Cafe Hemsen at the first floor of a rather old looking four story apartment building at the right hand side of the street, approximately fifty feet from the corner. Although the apartment building was concrete constructed, it seemed like it was a hundred years old with its rusty, narrow main door and half a dozen window frames on the front side facing the street. Those window frames probably hadn't seen a single drop of water except rain in the last ten years. Despite the impression the building made it did not stand out at all. On both sides of the street the buildings blended so nicely that they were separated only by a mortar line. They were very similar and squeezed together so tight it was hard to tell where their entrances were. About a dozen men were standing up in front of the entrance, chatting and sort of waiting for something. After ten more yards towards my target, I saw the horse racing ticket office looking like a little cubby hole right across from the cafe. The race results getting posted simultaneously after each race was probably the reason these men were hanging out

on the sidewalk. After a couple more steps I was able to see the inside of Hemsen from the street. Hemsen had a huge two piece glass window looking directly at the street. The name of the cafe was written on the front window using wall paint which had mostly peeled off in time. It took me a little while to figure out the real color of the iron frame around the front window. Although the surface was covered with rust stains, I could see it was probably white once upon a time.

At last I was at the doorway. As soon as I stepped in, I had to stop for a couple of seconds to get used to the excessive amount of smoke and the rather dark and nearly oxygen-free atmosphere. One thing I didn't have to adjust to was the indoor noise matching Hemsen with its neighborhood. It seemed as if somebody had inhaled a lung full of noise from the open market together with that much dust and air pollution from the side streets and blown them right into the cafe. As I was taking my first steps towards the middle of the room, I heard that familiar clinking noise, something like an annoying tin sound. It was coming from the cheap metal teaspoons hitting those little pot bellied teaglasses while people were stirring their teas. Nearly everybody had a glass of tea in front of them, and an ashtray with a burning cigarette at the other corner.

I got to spend a little time looking around, before I climbed up the stairs to the second floor which looked like a huge balcony located at the very back of the ground floor. I'd heard that the second floor belonged to the bridge players. It was low enough to serve tea and sodas through the railing by just lifting an arm from the main floor. Anyway, it was an interesting experience to observe those faces on the ground floor and realize how much in common they had although their ages were varying from seventeen to seventy seven. They had that tired look on their faces, expressing the amount of time and energy they kept spending there, day after day, by basically not doing much except playing cards. It wasn't easy to grasp the reasons behind it but they all seemed like they were happy with what they were doing since they had that nice warm smile on their faces quite frequently.

As I started walking towards the middle of the floor I saw the section employees worked. The walls were covered with a bunch of posters. The window frame around the work area had a couple cracks and a half circle shaped hole cut in the glass at the counter level to serve the drinks through. There was a heavy duty stove used for boiling water constantly for tea and coffee in the same section. It took me a while to realize there weren't any women on the floor. I suppose there would be several reasons behind it but as it was all these types of places have always been male dominant anyway. I thought female bridge players would prefer to be in a nice, fancy bridge club rather than a wreck like this. I am not sure what the case would be for other female card addicts. Most of what I saw and heard on the ground floor were loud slang conversations, smoke filling the air and chain smokers' dirty yellow teeth matching with their same color mustache edges.

When I decided to head upstairs, I got curious if these bridge players were similar to the majority of the cafe. I was also afraid they would not welcome a stranger to their group. At that point, as a beginner, probably the last thing that I needed was a discouragement like that. Besides, the reason I was there was to learn

and enjoy the game more by kibitzing better players and maybe make a couple of friends. Although my impression of the ground floor was on the optimistic side of the scale, I wasn't sure how everything was going to end up.

Anyway, I pulled myself together and got upstairs. I was careful enough not to hit my head on the pipes going parallel to the ceiling. The ceiling probably wasn't high enough, but so what, it wasn't the right time to be so picky anyway. There was a chess board with its pieces missing squeezed in the corner right after the stairs. A couple of loose coat hooks trying to hold on to their screws on the wall and a broken fan were the first things that I noticed when I was putting my jacket away.

The floor had only six card tables spread around. That was all right too; if I'd been expecting a luxurious club atmosphere I would have been headed back home long ago. I was feeling a little more confident by the time I started getting some responses after my greetings to the crew. I asked permission from four players and started kibitzing their game. Later in the day people started introducing themselves and I could see they were indeed very interested in helping me as soon as they realized I was a novice. By the time I was invited to join the late night crew for their casual everynight bar chat, I was pretty sure that I was going to get along with these people.

I am not sure how it all happened but I pretty much spent most of my days in that second floor of the "Maiden Club" until I quit my job in one of the upscale bridge clubs of Istanbul to get ready for my trip to The United States. This was about a year and a half after my first appearance in the cafe.

When I stopped going to the Maiden Club regularly, eveything was pretty much the same except a few small renovations done in the second floor and some new female faces. Card tables with some of the legs broken, dirty table cloths, old beaten up walls with paint peeling off their surface, smoke filling the air, clinking teaglass sound and the oxygen free atmosphere were still there when I left Turkey in 1993. Despite all my responsibilities of being a college student, I guess what persuaded me to be a part of that group was the people and what they had inside of them.

Although I can't see them anymore, I would be glad to say that they will have a permanent place in my memories, with a big warm smile on my face whenever I remember them.

My Father

by Basilia Rosario

It is a rainy day in San Francisco, my native town in the Dominican Republic. Because I can't go out to play I decide to watch TV; I go to the living room where the TV set is. I turn to Channel 13 and a movie is on about a lonely boy living in a fantasy world, where he imagines he has a friend to talk to and to play with. At my age, 11 years old, I can't understand why he can't find a friend. For a second I try to put myself in his shoes, but I can't, because I have my father, who is and always will be my partner and my close friend, all in one.

My father's name is Vincente Rosario. His nickname is Guido; I always call him Papa, which in English means "Daddy." He is five feet, six inches tall and weighs about 195 pounds. He has very expressive eyes and through them I can see if he is happy or sad. If he has been drinking alcohol I can tell, because his eyes turn red. The color of his eyes is light brown, making a good combination with his hair of the same color. The tone of his voice is very sweet. The color of his skin is tanned, because he is always exposed to the sun while practicing hunting, his favorite hobby.

We never have big disagreements. He always convinces me or vice versa. One day I ask him for a portable record player. Considering that I got good grades on my last examination, I ask him for it as a gift. This time he says, "Basilia, how can you ask me for a thing like that of your own when we have a good one for everybody? Please, sweetie, don't be selfish."

I am not prepared for this answer, so I forget about my petition for a while. Instead he gives me a camera. But, I wait for my next birthday and I ask him for a portable record again or something I know he will hate--a party. My dad doesn't like to be around a lot of people, so this time I win and I am very delighted with my new gift. I still remember the very first record he gave to me, "The Blue Danube," a very nice instrumental song. He still has the record player and the disc as a keepsake in the garage.

My old man always tries to surprise me, entering the house secretly, but he can't for three reasons. The first one is his perfume, because the smell of his lavender perfume enters the house before him. Second is his punctuality; he normally doesn't miss lunch at 12:00 or dinner at 6:00. Also at night he comes back home after the movies, at 10:00. The third reason is that I am frequently looking through the window waiting for him.

As an observer, nobody beats my father. Sometimes I can say that he can read my mind. One day I try to hide a big headache, because I want to go go out and he overprotects me. He studies me curiously when I ask for his permission; he sits me

on his leg and asks me, "What is going on?" I wonder how he knows. When I tell him the truth, he gives me an aspirin, but he lets me go out to play.

We are so much alike. We like to read and watch movies. Later we like to share our opinions about the book or the movie. Also, we share our preferences for the same food, especially cheese. I remember in the morning, when my mother was looking at the refrigerator for the cheese that she bought the day before and she didn't find it, she used to say, "I know, I know--the two mice of this house were here last night."

Perhaps in a few years my father won't be here for me, but his teaching will be illuminating my life when I remember him telling me, "Live to win in life and you will." He tells me so when I am crying because of some difficulty that makes me upset.

I ask him, "How can I win if everything I do comes out wrong?"

But he keeps telling me, "Don't concentrate on any mistakes, but learn from them."

I think it is normal that during some time in childhood, children are looking for a hero or a best friend. Thank God, in my case I don't have to look out of my house for those things, because my father is my hero and my best friend.

That Special Someone

by Olivia Burton

I met Marion in October of 1989. I had just had her granddaughter not too long ago, and her son brought me over to see her for the first time since we'd been dating. We went over to his aunt's, where his mother was. When we got there everybody was dancing and drinking. I thought they were having a party, but they were just having a little get together. When we walked into the kitchen where everybody was, all heads turned toward me. Ann, my boyfriend's aunt, asked, "Can I see your baby?"

I said, "Sure, but be careful. She is very active and will jump out of your arms."

Ann said, "She is beautiful, and so chunky."

"Thank you," I said.

Marion looked puzzled when she saw me. She had never seen me before; she was in California when I was dating her son. The first thing she said to me was, "Give Ma a kiss." At first I was kind of hesitant. I looked at my boyfriend. He shrugged his shoulders and gave me an "it's OK" look. I went over and kissed her.

Marion started dancing with her boyfriend and I started cracking up. I thought she was very funny. She has this dance that she does where she throws her head back, stomps her feet, and starts shaking her rump. It's so funny! She then started talking about her boyfriend, and the way she talked about that man was a shame. She called him all kinds of names, like "yellow boy," "egghead," and "crusty," but it was all in fun. I told my boyfriend, "Your mother is a trip. Is she always like this?"

He said, "Sometimes, especially when she has been drinking."

Marion kissed me about 50 times that night, and to be honest, it was getting on my nerves. There are times when these loving feelings are appropriate, but at this time I was already nervous about being there and she was making me feel very uncomfortable.

Instead of Marion, let's call her "Ma." I've never called her by her first name; even when I met her, she wanted me to call her "Ma." Little did I know that this lady would have a big impact on my life.

Now let's talk about Ma. She is a pretty short woman. She is about 200 lbs., and she has dark brown hair that she wears in a ponytail and deepset dark brown eyes. She loves to wear house dresses, because they're loose and comfortable. Ma loves jewelry, especially gold. She has a pair of gold hoop earrings and a real nice bracelet. She also just bought a beautiful gold chain that's about 18 inches long and has linked barrel shapes. Ma has some beautiful clothes and even though she is a little overweight she can dress real nice.

Ma has been a very hard worker all her life. Before she moved up here to Haverhill from Boston she was a presser with a cleaners in Newton for a couple of years. Then she decided to change her profession and became a C.N.A., working at the Glynn Memorial Nursing Home located in Haverhill. At first she worked regular hours; then, as the task of paying the rent and bills got harder, she had to start putting in longer hours and never had time for herself. She looks terrible after working doubles for a week straight.

In the mornings, if she is not working, you can find her at the kitchen table drinking her coffee and watching her talk shows. Her favorite ones are Sally Jessy Raphael and Jerry Springer. After the shows have gone off she starts, as she says, "putting around the house," which means light housework. This routine never changes unless she just worked a double, and then it gets done in the afternoon.

Ma takes great pride in her house; she keeps it looking really nice. She loves ceramic clowns and has quite a few. She also has this plant she loves, and she takes very good care of it. I think she's had it about two years now, and I think the plant likes her just as much, because it has grown into a beautiful plant and it hasn't died yet.

Ma is a person who loves to help people. If she sees you trying, she'll give you anything she has. For example, she went out and bought me a new air conditioner when it was really hot this past summer; when the dryer I had wouldn't dry anymore, she went out and bought me a new one. When I need things for my house she gives them to me. If there is anything you need and she can give it to you, it's yours. She is a very generous person.

Ma loves to party, especially on her days off. She loves R&B and jazz and really loves down home blues and likes to listen to it loud. We always know when Ma is getting ready to party. This is what she'll do: first she'll call me and have me go to the liquor store and get her favorites, like Seagram's Extra Dry Gin. Nothing else is acceptable. She then asks us if we want to come over, only to keep her company, because she doesn't like to be by herself and she doesn't like to drink alone. But don't get me wrong: Ma will definitely party by herself. She never wants you to leave, because if she's drinking, that's the time she wants company.

Ma has five boys and one girl. Her youngest is 11 and spoiled rotten, probably because she is the youngest and the only girl. Ma has six granddaughters and no grandsons. When she found out that her third son's girlfriend was pregnant and might be having a boy, she was happy and said, "The girls are kicked to the curb when this boy comes." When she said that, I was bugging. I said, "Ma, don't say that." She told me, "The girls better watch out."

She and I have had our differences. There was one time when I was going to move back to Boston. When her son told her, she was very upset. I had tried to call her one day and she answered the phone, said hello, and, when she knew it was me, tried to brush me off. I said that I was on my way

over to her house. She said, "Yeah, okay." By the way she said this, I knew something was wrong. I didn't know who she was mad at, whether it was me or somebody else. When I got over there, she was sitting in the living room watching some mystery. She turned around to see who was coming in, saw it was me, and said, "Oh, it's you." Right then and there I knew she was mad at me, because she always asks me how I'm doing.

"Well," I said. "What's the matter?"

She said that she "didn't feel like being bothered right now."

Then I asked her, "Did I do something?"

"Why are you moving back to Boston?" she asked me.

I told her, "I don't like it out here anymore."

"What is in Boston for you?" she asked. "Nothing. You need to stay out here, where you can do something for these kids you have."

"I'm a big girl and I can take care of myself."

Well, she was even madder after I said that to her. You should have seen the look on her face. She was red as a tomato and said, "Well, Libby, go on and do whatever you want. I don't care."

I left and went back home. I was pretty upset, but I had to consider what she said. I had to think about the girls too, not just myself. Her favorite line is "Let me mind my business," but she never does. I know she wants the best for me, so I don't mind when she's in my business, but sometimes she has to learn to let me make my own mistakes. There have been times when she'll go to bat for me; she will not let anyone hurt me or take advantage of me. For example, I had some people living with me, and they paid me only $40 a week to live there. They ate that money up in food in a week, so I was left with paying my bills and paying rent all by myself. After I told Ma what was going on she went over to my house and told them a thing or two. They ended up leaving.

My mother died when I was very young, and Ma has been my mother figure. She does everything a mother does, and she does it for me. I guess that's why I can honestly say she has me spoiled.

There is one thing that has me scared for Ma and that is her high blood pressure. I never told her this because I was afraid of what she might say, but she loves spicy food, and all that salt can send her pressure right through the roof. I lost a lot of important people in my life and I don't want to lose her -- she means everything to me. She is my special someone.

Ray

by Samara Hall

If I could turn back time to August 19, 1995, I would have called my friend Ray.

August 19 was a Saturday; however, it was not a typical Saturday at my house as my parents were gone across country on a vacation and it was just my two brothers and me at home.

I remember the day. It was very warm outside so my brothers and I decided to have a cookout with several of our friends and we had a really great time. The next day, Sunday, was another very nice day. Nothing much went on that day, though. It was more of a day for relaxation and to get ready for another week of work.

Monday, August 21, I went over to my sister's house to take care of a few odds and ends that she had asked me to do. While I was at her house, her son Jason was home and I was talking with him for a while. About ten minutes after I got there, Jason said he was going to my house to get some bread, as they had run out. When he came back, he told me that my friend Michelle had called and wanted me to call her back. "Did she say what she wanted?" I asked.

"She said it had something to do with Ray but she didn't go into detail," Jason replied.

I picked up the phone and called Michelle and asked her what she wanted. She said, "Samara, I was on my way into work this morning and I heard on the radio that they identified a body found off the coast of Kittery, Maine, as Raymond Beshara."

As my heart dropped, I asked, "Are you sure it is the Ray that we know?"

"I'm not sure, but it sounds like it would've been him because he told Dicky he was going diving for mussels one day over the weekend."

I was in such denial and shock that I asked Michelle for the phone number of the radio station where she heard this tragic news. When I called the station, they basically told me the same thing but said he was from Pelham, NH. I was not sure of his address at that time. Ray was a drifter, always moving from place to place; at one time he even lived at my house.

With hopes that it was not him, I called Michelle back and told her that this man lived in Pelham, NH.

"It's him," she said. "He just moved back to Pelham. Don't you remember him telling us to go visit him?"

I still could not believe it so I figured I would call his parents' house to confirm what I was hearing. When I called the house, his sister Leslie answered and right then I knew that it was him as she sounded as though she had been crying. I said, "Hi, Leslie, this is Samara. I heard on the news of a Ray Beshara. Was it him?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Leslie, I am so sorry. Tell your whole family how sorry we all are over this tragedy."

After that was confirmed, I called my sister Lori and asked her if I should try to get in touch with our parents or just wait until they got home. My parents had driven to Colorado for a vacation and to see our cousin and his wife.

"Call them in Colorado right away, just in case they would want to fly home for the funeral," Lori said. She was in shock also. When I told her she just could not believe it was him.

When I called my cousin's house, his wife answered the phone and I asked her if my parents had arrived yet.

"No, but we are going out to eat with them tonight. Is there something wrong?"

"Yes," I replied. "One of our really close friends of the family passed away over the weekend and I figured I should let them know."

"O, Lord," she said. "Would you like me to tell them after we go out to eat?"

"Yes, if you don't mind," I said. "Go out to eat and have a good time, then gradually break the news to them as once you say you received a phone call from me, their hearts will drop. Right away say it has nothing to do with anyone in the family."

She replied, "OK, I'll tell them. And by the way, I'm really sorry."

I said thank you and we hung up the phone.

Ray was by far the smartest man I ever knew. In 1987, he built my brother Billy's house. It is a contemporary home with cathedral ceilings and a deck off the master bedroom. He built this house mostly through his mind; he had no exact blueprints. He also helped my same brother build a camp in Hiram, Maine, where he has land.

Not only could Ray build houses, but he was also a mathematician and an engineer, he had his pilot's license and taught my brother Billy how to fly. I remember one time he took my friend Michelle, my sister, and me on a plane ride to Martha's Vineyard and paid for everything: the plane rental, the car rental, and lunch. We had a really great time.

Ray was 46 years old and hung around with people his age but also enjoyed being with us younger adults. He would always crack jokes to Michelle and me and say we were "the Lee Sisters--Ugly and Homely." Of course he was just joking.

The day Ray died, he was doing something he enjoyed very much. He was an expert diver; however, this day, he was just diving for mussels with his friend and he made a very careless mistake. He dove in the water with just his swim trunks on and nothing else. After he did not return to the boat, his friend got nervous and called the Coast Guard and an hour later they found him in seven feet of water.

I really miss Ray and always will. He always said, "I'm the oldest teenager that ever lived."

A Ride to Remember

by Adam Lane

There are certain times in my life when I seem to crave different kinds of foods or sweets, and when I was younger, one particular fetish I had was for Italian Ices. I could (and would) eat virtually any flavor they had, such as watermelon or lemon, and especially cherry, which is very uncharacteristic for me because I was and still am a very fussy eater.

It all happened in the middle of an agonizing heat wave. The sun had just set, leaving all the heat and humidity from the last few days. The pool was closed for the night and I wanted something to refresh my dehydrated body.

"Mom, can I go to the store and get some ice cream? I'm hot," I said, in a whine only a ten year old boy could use.

"No! It's past your bedtime," she replied sternly.

"But MA! I want ice cream!" I complained in an even more whiney voice.

"Make it quick, then."

"Thank you, Mom. Hey, can I take my new bike?"

"Hurry up. Don't get hit by any cars. They can't see you that well at night."

So there I was on my BMX Mongoose, which was just as good as any hot rod to me. It had black free-wheel mags, meaning I no longer could brake by just pressing on the pedal. It had a double-goose neck (like I knew what that meant at the time!) and it also had black mushroomy grips on the handle bars, which were made especially to prevent blisters.

Up many a steep hill I traveled to get to the local Richdale convenience store. The vigorous bike ride made my thirst for an Italian ice grow with the rotation of each pedal. With sweat on my brow, I reached the only major street, Route 125, which I had to cross. As usual, I listened to my mother and crossed with the utmost caution. I reached the front door of the store and hesitantly left my bike outside. I was afraid it would get stolen. Because I valued my bike so much, I shopped very quickly, grabbing my icy treats -- one grape, one watermelon, and three of my favorite cherry ices, and a few of those cheap wooden spoons you use, trying not to break them as you eat. I went outside, sat down on my bike, and commenced eating one of the cherry ices. It probably took all of five minutes to wolf down the entire thing, including the bottom, which is by far the best part, because of the large clump of sugar that settles and freezes to the bottom of the cup.

I got a little cocky riding my bike home. I went zooming across the intersection without getting hit by a car. There I was, on cloud nine with my bag of Italian ices in my right hand, pedaling downhill at warp speed. I let go of one of the mushroom handle grips and coasted downhill without steering, which was no great feat for me at the time. My trouble began when I decided to look over my left shoulder for a few seconds. I don't quite remember what possessed me to turn

around, but when I finally did, I was in for the surprise of my life. There in front of me sat a late '70s Nissan 240zx, black, which seemed to have mystically appeared. My heart dropped to my sneakers. My first reaction was to press on my pedals to stop. When that failed, I abruptly grabbed my handle bars in an attempt to prevent myself from hitting the rear of the car straight on. In avoiding the center of the vehicle, I clipped the rear driver's side and was propelled, gracefully, over my handlebars, ten feet into the air, head over heels one and a half times, landing directly on my knees, and then to my hands, barring me from the trauma of a head injury. Had I been a gymnast, I probably would have scored a perfect 10! The impact of my bare knees against solid concrete jolted me into a state of shock, leaving me with just enough strength to roll over onto my back. I tried to lift myself, using the car for leverage, but that attempt failed miserably, my hands slick with blood slipping from the driver's side mirror, forcing me to fall back onto the unforgiving concrete to lie there in my own blood. I saw a shadow running towards me.

"Adam?" A concerned voice called softly. "It's Mrs. Kerem, your sister's boyfriend's mother."

"Help me! I'm hurt," I pleaded in a pain-stricken voice.

She sat down and gingerly placed my head on her lap, fearing that I might have suffered a concussion. She chattered on and on to me about our summer vacation. Joshua, a boy she had been babysitting, picked up three of the four Italian ices that had flown, and coasted down the one last hill to my house on my mangled bicycle. The fourth Italian ice had rolled underneath the car, and I could only lie there and watch it dripping from the dents and holes it had incurred from the accident.

Moments later, my grief-stricken parents arrived, followed by an ambulance. Two men placed me on a cold hardwood board, wrapping my two badly swollen knees in soft, comforting leg braces. They hoisted me into the back of the well air-conditioned ambulance. My mother made sure that she was going along for the ride, telling the EMTs she would not have it any other way. On the way to the hospital, I realized that for the first time in my life, I was riding in the back of the ambulance with the lights flashing and the siren screaming. This took my mind off the excruciating pain I was feeling.

At the hospital, they cleaned and stitched my wounds and sent me to x-ray to make sure I'd not broken any bones. (I hadn't.) I was released into the arms of my caring parents, who followed the doctor's orders by not allowing me to leave the house until the swelling went down.

Not only do my knees still show scars from this melee, but my bike does also. My father had to bend back the handlebars to their original upright position. The plastic seat needed to be replaced, because of the cracks it suffered from its own rough landing.

I learned from that day onward to use more caution when riding my bike, because not even I was exempt from getting hurt. I also made a new friend that day. His name was Ben, and for some reason, he felt awfully bad that I had hurt myself by hitting his precious car.

ATTACK

by Steven Dionne

It looked to be a normal June afternoon, hot and sunny. I was getting ready to go out and take in some of the sun. Suddenly, I heard my mother try to yell down to me from upstairs, "Steve, get my inhaler."

My mother is having an asthma attack, I told myself. So I went to try and find her inhaler. It wasn't in the usual place; it was the first time I didn't see it just out in the open. My mother had made it downstairs by now. I'd seen my mother have asthma attacks before but this time it was different because she had gone from being fine to having a full attack in only a few moments. I handed the inhaler to her, and she tried to take in her first inhalation. My mom couldn't breathe in enough air to make it work. My mom and I knew it was only going to get worse.

I called 911, trying to stay calm in front of my mom. I heard the number ring twice. A woman's voice said, "911 operator."

"Umm ... this is Steve Dionne. I live at 113 Brown St. My mom is having a chronic asthma attack. I need help now!"

The 911 operator read back the information I had given her. "Help is on its way, Mr. Dionne."

Help was the key word. I felt relieved but only for a moment. I knew it was going to get worse before help would arrive. It was like sitting in rush hour traffic: everything is moving slow, you are going crazy, and yet you know there is nothing you can do and nowhere to go. You wish you could go back to where you had come from, where things were fine and you had some control over what would happen next.

With my mom barely conscious, I brought her outside so I could still be with her while flagging down the ambulance. By this time my mom was delirious, saying, "I'm going to die."

"You're not going to die. Everything is going to be fine," I told her. She went on telling me, "I love you, Steven."

"I love you too, Mom. Hang on, Mom, help is coming," I replied. I tried to reassure her by telling her it was going to be all right and that together we had both gone through this before. What I think I was doing was trying to reassure myself. Finally I had seen the lights and heard the sirens of the approaching ambulance. By now my mom had lost consciousness and had turned blue, and I was trying to administer CPR to no avail. I stood up and waved the fire truck and ambulance down. They rushed over, checking her vital signs. My mom wasn't breathing at all.

The paramedics cut her red blouse open, continuously monitoring her heart while trying to resuscitate her. The paramedics were working fast, giving her shots of adrenaline. The paramedics were yelling back and forth to each other. I couldn't comprehend what they were saying. I was too busy staring at my mom, not being

able to do anything for her. They had to put a tube down her throat so they could attach a bag to squeeze an air bellows down into her lungs. It was the scariest situation I had ever experienced. It was like watching an episode of the television show ER. I remember sitting on the bottom stair of my house wondering, is she going to die? It bothered me to think that she wouldn't see me get married or ever see my children.

I followed the paramedics as they put my mom into the ambulance to transport to the hospital. They slammed the two doors to the ambulance shut. I expected to wake up and have this nightmare over with, but on the contrary, it wasn't close to being over. I asked a fireman, "How does it look?"

He told me it was bad but that she still had a pulse. I don't know if his comment was supposed to make me feel better, but it didn't. I called up the rest of my family, told them what had happened and instructed them to meet me at the hospital. I warned them it didn't look good. I grabbed her medication and got a ride from my friend Paul to the hospital because I was in no shape for driving.

My family and I met up at the hospital. The nurses couldn't give us any information on my mother's condition, and the only thing we could do is wait. That is what we did. It seemed like an eternity before the doctor came out to talked to us. He told us that they had stabilized my mom's condition. My mom stayed in the hospital for five days. She came home that following week and jumped right back into the game of life.

That whole ordeal changed more than just my mother's life: it changed my outlook on life as well. I learned a lot about myself. I found out how much I love my mom and took her for granted. I learned that I have wasted time on stupid things, such as arguing with people like my parents and my girlfriend. I still do argue but I'm more apt to just drop the argument or at least cut it short, because it is usually so senseless.

I learned not to take life for granted, which I think most people do. I was always in a rush to get nowhere fast. Well, nowhere will still be there tomorrow.

P.J.

by Melissa Marini

It was a hot summer morning. All the kids were home for summer vacation. I decided to take my kids to the beach. Whenever I took my kids to the beach, I would also take my step-brothers, Seth and P.J. They were older, and would help me with the children so that I could spend a little more time lying in the sun.

I packed up my kids and headed to my father's house. P.J. and Seth both lived there with my father and their mother. They were my step-brothers, but to me and to the rest of family, they were as good as ours. When I arrived at my father's house, Seth and my other brother Chad were the only ones home. They told me that P.J. was missing. He had been kidnapped by a stranger while he was fishing at Plug's Pond in Haverhill. My brother Seth and his friends were with P.J., but by the time they got help, he was gone.

In all the chaos, no one remembered to call me. The minute I heard, I jumped in my car and flew home. I dropped my kids off with my boyfriend, and headed to the pond where he was last seen. As I drove up there, none of what was happening felt real to me. Nobody ever thinks that something like that will happen in their family. The reality is that it can happen to anyone, anywhere.

When I arrived at Plug's Pond, I couldn't believe what I saw. There were so many television cameras, police officers, and people milling about. They were all there to help in the search for P.J. After I struggled and pushed my way through the crowd, I found my family. I don't ever remember feeling so scared and so helpless in my life.

My family and I and a lot of volunteers searched for hours with no luck. Most of us went back down to the bottom of the hill to rest. As we sat there, I began to think that maybe P.J. had gotten away from his kidnapper and was just hiding somewhere alone and afraid. I was wrong. From way up in the woods, we could hear the police officers yelling down, "We found him." We all just sat there in silence. We didn't know if he was dead or alive. As we waited, I could see my brother Mike running down the hill. He was headed straight for me, and I thought he was going to plow me over. Before I could move, he grabbed me. He cried and hugged me so hard that I knew then that P.J. was dead. The rest of my family knew too. I have never seen and felt so much pain. Even people that never met P.J. were hurting.

Over the next few days, my family got a lot of support from friends, family, and many people that we had met during the search. To be honest, it didn't really help. The hardest part of all was getting through the wake and funeral. I honestly didn't think that my family would get through it. Hundreds of people went to the wake to pay their respects, but it was just the family at the funeral. To this day, I still don't know how I made it through that week.

PJ was only thirteen when he died. He was brutally murdered by a man named Erwin Hartford. That man is now spending his life in prison.

Three and a half years have passed and I think of PJ often. He was a good kid. He loved sports and usually stayed out of trouble. He never really had a chance to enjoy life. I think that the day Erwin killed my brother, he also killed himself. He will spend the rest of his days in prison, and that's not living. I guess if I had my choice between him getting the death penalty or life in prison, I would have to pick life in prison. He now has a lifetime of death.

Fire!

by Madeline Casanova

It was Thursday, October 5, 1995. My day was going really well. After going to school and the stores, I had come home to study and to take care of my 17-month-old daughter. As the night crawled up, I had put my daughter to sleep, picked up my apartment, and headed in to take a shower. Once I finished, I lay down to sleep.

About an hour and a half after I had fallen fast asleep, there was a big explosion, one that woke me from my sleep. I could feel my heart throbbing really, really fast. I got nervous and paranoid, so I got up and looked around my room, but everything looked fine. I looked out my window and could see glass and a piece of plywood on the ground. I went to the back door. I could hear my neighbor crying and banging on a door. At this point, I was scared. I called out her name. She said to me "Maddy, grab the baby! There's a fire." Now I felt my heart wanting to come out of my chest. I ran back to my room, grabbed a pair of pants, put them on, grabbed my daughter, and ran out the front door. As I was running down the stairs with my daughter, I could hear myself saying, "This can't be happening to me." When I got downstairs, there was a big relief in my mind.

Outside, I leaned against the building. I could hear all the people that lived around me telling me to move away from the building. But I was in a state of shock and couldn't move. I felt like I was helpless and paralyzed. A man who lived in the front of the building came and helped me away. As I was crossing the street, I looked back to see if I cold see my neighbors, but could see no one I knew. I started crying and telling people "There are more people still inside. Please help them!"

A heroic man ran into the burning building to help the people inside. At this point I was feeling scared and thinking that my friends were going to burn. My daughter had a confused, surprised look on her face. About 15 minutes later, the man ran out of the building with my friends. I ran to them and asked, "Are you guys alright?"

"Yeah, but we're scared." I felt relieved knowing that everybody got out safe.

Now, with everyone out of the building, we were all standing there with pajamas and no shoes, crying and trying to comfort each other. At this point, I could hear sirens coming closer and closer.

When the Fire Department got to the scene, everybody was already out. The flames had already burned through all of the first floor. I could not see my apartment because it was on the left hand side, but from the way the first floor looked, I figured that my apartment was as bad as the other ones.

A really nice man was trying to get us up into his house because it was raining and all the smoke hung in the air. When I got upstairs, I asked his wife if I could use the phone. I called my sister and told her, "Come get the baby." She asked me all sorts of questions, but I kept telling her, "There's a fire in the building. Please

come and get the baby. We have no shoes or jackets." I hung up, left my daughter with someone watching her, and went back outside. I was hysterically crying because the whole house was in flames. I walked to the side of the house and could see flames shooting out and up. I couldn't believe all that was going on.

I walked down the street to meet my sister. I couldn't believe that people treated me like nothing had ever happened. When I caught up with my sister, we went back to the man's house to get my daughter. As I was walking up the stairs, I could hear her crying. When she saw me come in, she still had that look of confusion on her face. I hugged her and told her, "Don't worry. Everything is going to be alright."

After about two hours, I went back to the scene, and the house was still in flames. I went to talk to the Lieutenant, and he directed me to the American Red Cross truck that was set up. The man from the Red Cross asked me, "Do you have a place to stay?"

"Yes," I answered. He gave me a voucher for $85 to purchase clothes for me and my daughter, which I spent most of on my little girl.

Three days later, I went back to the building to see if I could salvage any clothes, books, pictures, or furniture, but all I could take out was clothes. In the end, none of them were worth saving because they smelled of smoke and were badly stained.

Now, a month later, I feel like everywhere I go I smell fire. Most of my friends think I'm going crazy, but it must be my mind playing tricks on me. Perhaps I'm still not over the near disaster. I used to worry about accidents happening and things that were beyond my control. Now I'm much more likely to believe that what will happen cannot be changed. I guess you could say that I believe our fate is already somewhat decided.

It appears that the fire was a case of arson, and the police are offering a $5000 reward to anyone who knows anything about the crime. It frightens me to know that someone else has such an impact on my life. I am currently living in the projects, but this is not what I want for me or for my daughter. I want to provide her with everything my parents provided for me. Maybe the only good thing that did come out of the fire is that, no matter what, I am more determined than ever to get an education, and to be able to make choices in my life. I'm not exactly defying fate, but I'm trying to steer it in the right direction.

The Greenery

by Alexandra Diaz

The Greenery is a nursing home and rehabilitation facility in North Andover for head injury patients. I started working there back in July, 1994. In July I graduated as a certified nurses' aide, so I applied at the Greenery and Trudy Miller, the director, hired me. I went to the orientation for two hours. Hank, the registered nurse, took me and a group of people for a tour in the nursing home.

In the nursing home there are three floors. The first floor has the main desk, physical therapy department, the kitchen and the dining room. This is where the residents have their dinner and also where the head injury patients have activities. On the second floor there is the Sutton Suite, which is for elders that can manage on their own. The other side is Kittridge, where the residents need more assistance. I sort of liked that floor because it's quieter. On the other hand, the third floor is a lot different because Osgood is noisier and wilder. Head injury patients are kept on that floor.

I worked on that floor for a year and a half. Every morning I would get my assigned residents, wake them up, and change them if they were wet. Then I had to put their socks and shoes on and walk or wheel them to the television room (for short we called it the TDR). We had to make sure that the residents looked decent before entering the TDR. We sat them in their assigned chairs and passed out their breakfast to them. I would have to help them open up their milk or cut their food into small pieces. Some residents I would have to feed because their memory was gone.

By 8:00, I had to start getting their clothes ready and bring them to the shower room. I would go to the TDR and take one resident at a time for a shower. I had to shave them and brush their teeth, then give them a bath. After the bath I would dress them up and comb their hair and bring them to the television room. It was basically the same routine every morning.

At 10:00 we passed out snacks to the residents, after the activity was done. The other nurses and I used to take turns supervising the residents because we took turns taking our morning breaks. Then we had to make sure that their rooms were cleaned.

At 12:00 we had to pass out their lunch and help them out or feed them. At that time it was wild. A fight would break out because the residents were out of control. At one time, it wasn't that bad, until the other Greenery in Connecticut sent us violent patients. The new patients would grab the nurses to hit and spit at them. It was getting worse by the day. When that would happen, the behavioral specialist would put the patients in five minute quiet time. But what the hell do they know what that means if

they lost their sense of memory? All their memories are kept with anger, so they would take them out on us.

I was going to work every morning on that floor with fear, thinking that when I woke up the residents, they would hit me or do something. On that same day I had to watch a resident in the TDR. I was sitting on the heater and she came up to me and slapped me in the face. I was furious and I had to control myself, which was hard for me to do. I grabbed her two arms and put them behind her head and put her on five minutes of quiet time.

I became stressed out. I didn't want to be there anymore. I was asking myself, "How am I going to pay my debts if I quit?" I was stuck until I went and applied at Nurses Services, Inc. in New Hampshire and they hired me. The next morning when I awoke, I called the Greenery and said, "I quit." They weren't expecting me to do that, but I felt so good after I did what I did.

I met a lot of nice and mean employees in that nursing home. The reason I say mean is because the employees were jealous of me and they would talk behind my back. I found out all this when a friend of mine told me that one of those girls said that I was losing too much weight so I might be infected with a disease. They also said that I slept with half of the guys that worked there. I didn't know exactly who said these things, so I never bothered to do anything about it but ignored them. They would say hi to me with a smile. They were the stupid ones because I knew what was going on.

This was a good experience for me because of seeing the head injury patients with half faces and no hands that looked like that because of drinking and driving, drug overdose, and trying to commit suicide because they couldn't control their anger. It made me open my eyes and take life more seriously. At one time I became depressed and angry and I was thinking about getting into a car accident, but as I can see, I'm a little stronger than the residents.

I will never forget my bad experiences at the Greenery, but it'll be the last time I get a job like that in my life.

My First Job

by Maria Figuereo

It is evident that people need to work to survive; otherwise, they won't provide the money to supply food and other needs. Since work must be part of our lives we have to make it as pleasant as possible.

I got my first job two weeks after I came to this country. I remember my first day of work. I really was so excited because I wanted to work, which is natural at the age of 23. I can't express how I felt that day. I was so anxious what kind of work I was going to be doing and also to meet the people I would be sharing with. Fortunately, it was a crowded factory in which most of the employees were Spanish people. All people were so kind to me. There was no one who didn't give me a pretty smile, so that made me feel comfortable.

When I started to work in this factory, I never thought that I would be spending 10 years of my life working there. It was one of the biggest factories in Massachusetts. This leather factory prepared the leather in order to make shoes, belts, coats, and other leather items. The leather came to this factory with a grainy texture and a dull appearance; however, it was amazing how these pieces of leather went out. That is why this was a successful company. There were some years in which they made a profit of millions of dollars. At the time that they were successful, employees also succeeded, but unfortunately the company decided to move the factory to Haiti, where they would be paying fewer taxes to the government.

My mother was the one who got me the job, and she had explained about the kind of work that she performed there. The boss placed me to work with her. I really liked the job because we didn't get bored doing it. To paint the leather using different colors and to design it with different styles made this work very interesting. The place wasn't neat. It was a big room with rustic and dusty floors which had three long tables located parallel to one another. The tables also had a series of sticks at them from which we had to hand up the skins in order to dry them.

Each day became more enjoyable to me. There were a lot of women working at this department who liked to make jokes or to talk about interesting topics. Luckily, we worked free because there was not any boss passing around constantly--although we had the responsibility of painting 80 skins each day. The boss maintained a record, so he went every day to check how many skins each woman had painted. There was also a specialized woman who, using a sample, inspected every single leather that we painted. Every day after she inspected the skins, she came back with some which, according to her, weren't the same as the sample; therefore, we had to repair those. It was really hard for us because we had to do the

task of the day, which was to paint 80 skins, plus repair those from the day before. But the most important was to maintain the record of having done the day's task; otherwise, we wouldn't keep the job.

I was very motivated and it helped me to do a better job. I was 23 years old; moreover, I wanted to be independent, to make my own money, and to be able to accomplish one of my goals, which was to get the money that I needed to go back to the Dominican Republic and marry my boyfriend. It was the only way I could realize my dream because my boyfriend was confronting a difficult economic situation. Also, to help my husband to come to this country in the future depended largely on my job.

Each day new skins came to the factory. The first years while I worked there I believe were the most successful years of this factory. I remember the day when a big truck came replete of lizards (iguanas), the most beautiful leather that they made. I had never seen the leather before, so I was curious about it. A lot of processes had to be done to this leather in order to finish it. After the man in the wet department prepared it, the leather was introduced in boxes containing water which on very cold days was almost freezing. In order to proceed, they had to cut each lizard right at its legs. The boss preferred a woman to do that. He wanted a neat job. I really don't know why but when the boss went to choose the woman, he preferred me. My first day doing this job was excellent and the boss was very satisfied. He said that I did a fast and terrific job. Each day, I tried to do my best job even when my hands got frozen by the cold water and got sore using hand scissors for many hours. Now instead of working with women I was working with men. At the time, it was natural in most cases that a woman had to confront sexual harassment. When there is a group of men working with a young woman, there is always a man who tries to conquer her. But if the woman knows how to deal with it, she will end up with the solution to the situation. That was my case. To clarify, when I arrived at the place those first days, a man stared at me. By the way that he looked at me, I knew what his intentions were. So, I stopped him and from that day on every man respected me.

During my years of working at this factory, I really worked too hard, but I also made a lot of money, because luckily the work that I used to do was very well paid. It allowed me to save the money to buy a house. It is a shame that I lost my house as a result of losing my job when they moved the factory to Haiti.

Having lost my job made me think about preparing for the future. I decided to come to study to have more opportunities in my life. I realized the value of being a professional. As you get to be a professional, beside the fact that you make more money, it is easy for you to get a job. Also I have found out about the importance of having a good relationship with people around you. That makes you feel very good about yourself. I can say that those years of work in this factory were very pleasant for me. I still remember most of my coworkers.

WHATEVER BLOWS YOUR SKIRT UP!

by Shaun Watson

The hardest and the funniest job that I have ever had is one of a female illusionist; most of you will know it as a drag queen. Drag is a job of glamour, and finally after all these years one of respect (especially with the recent trends in movies). I started doing this three years ago one Halloween in October of 1992. I decided to go as a woman so I had the girls at the salon I was working at fix me up: hair, makeup, everything -- except clothes that is. I picked out my own.

So after I was all dolled up I went out to this night club. I never in a million years had expected the reaction that I would get. The girls dressed me so well that even I didn't know who I was. I won first prize for the best costume that night. I walked up to get my prize and then in front of everyone I whipped off my wig; everyone was in shock because I took off my wig. The place became silent. Then came the applause, and from that point on I knew I was going to be a performer.

It was just my luck that the owner of the club was there. He came up to me and said, "Do you do this professionally"?

"Why no, I don't," I said.

"Well you should," he said, and the rest, as they say, is history. I have a show at a dance club called Stars on Route 1 in Peabody, doing an impersonation show. Every show is different.

To get ready for a show takes me a lot of time; depending on the characters that I will be doing, the average time is anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half.

First I have to shave, then put on my base, then proceed applying the rest of my makeup. One thing about being in show business, you never know what could happen. You have to be prepared for any event on stage, and manage to maintain composure and stay in character. One time I was doing a Gloria Estefan number and I was dancing up a storm. I did this little move where I bend at the waist. Then it happened...my wig fell off. Luckily, I caught it in mid air. The audience cheered. If that wasn't enough humiliation, as I was putting my wig back on, I fell off the stage. I wasn't hurt: just my pride was. There was another time when I was doing Dolly Parton, and my breasts fell out of my dress onto the stage, rolling down the stairs, to this table of customers. I bent over, picked them up, and put them back into my bra and proceeded like nothing ever happened.

I learned a lot about myself through this job. I'm able to express myself in ways that few can. I have learned how to be more patient with people and understand what diversity really stands for. I think people's reactions are the best part of my job. I've heard it all, everything, from "Where do you put it?" to "Where do you buy your clothes? "

I tell you this job is not for the money. It would take me at least five years of not buying any new clothes to make up for all the outfits I own. I have a three bedroom house and two are used for storage. That tells you a little about how much money goes into a show. Nothing can ever compare to the applause that comes from the audience and to knowing you were a part in brightening someone's night. It's a job I hope to be doing when I'm sixty. Of course I'll have to find new characters to do. I wonder what Madonna will look like when she's sixty? Maybe I can do her.

A Vietnamese Soldier

by Van Thang Mac

Having graduated from high school, I thought that I could keep studying higher, but the death of my father, who was the breadwinner of my family, destroyed completely my dream. Our simple lives became more difficult. My mother, who had worked hard before, had to work harder, but she could provide us only two meals a day. In that situation, I could not go to school without thinking of my mother's sacrifice and hardship. Consequently, I tried to look for a job at many places. Unfortunately, no place agreed to accept a young man who was of draft age and did not have any skill at that time. Desperately, I joined the army and accepted being a soldier as a career.

My mother cried very much because of my decision, but I had no choice. I could not stay home dodging military service and then becoming a burden for her. In her mind, she always thought that she would lose me because at that time the Vietnam war was extremely violent and many young men had gone but only a few returned undamaged. I did not know any details about Nationalism and Communism. I never thought of joining the army for ideals' sake, but just for solving difficulties in my family. However, one thing I knew exactly was that I could not see my mother every day as before and that my life would be changed completely from that moment on.

The first days in the military training center were so strange and hurtful. I was trained carefully to do the job -- kill or be killed. They forced me to eat faster, but sleep little, to obey and suffer iron discipline absolutely, and to speak shorter, but work harder. Rain or shine, I had to practice running and crawling under the fire power, reaching steep hills or crossing rivers by rope, living and escaping under severe conditions of hot sand areas, in leech and mosquito infested swamps or in jungles full of snakes and insects. I also studied how to use many weapons and especially how to shoot precisely. Tactics both individual and in team were taught as well. Preparing to be a platoon leader in the future, I had to know how to use maps and to call artillery support, air strikes, and even medical evacuations. Naturally, leadership and command were the main subjects that were explained by many experienced officers who had been in the army many years.

Nine months' time in a military school was too short for a soldier, but it was long enough to change my life physically and mentally. A skinny and feeble man nine months before, I became a strong and tough one now. I was no longer sick when the weather changed. My skin became darker and I could stand up to any weather conditions. Becoming more courageous and clever, I felt more self confidence. I was happier than ever before when I realized that beside me there were still many other young men who were in

the same situation. Obviously I could not live happily with my family on the others' sacrifices. I had to share the responsibility with them In the danger and the hardship, I found a new emotion -- the love among the combatant companions. I was very proud of joining the army.

After the solemn graduation ceremony, I left the school proudly. As a bird just escaping the cage, I raised my head looking at the blue sky, taking a deep breath and smiling happily. I looked back at the school's gate, then raised my hand, saluting good bye. The three red striped yellow flag was waving gently on the top of the gate as if seeing me off. An indescribable emotion was agitating my heart. I left the school, but I would keep its unforgettable image in my mind forever.

My mother was very happy to see me back, but there seemed to be an anxiety in her eyes. I knew what she was anxious for. However, I did not want to ask. Both my mother and I wanted to keep the short time we lived together lasting joyfully. We both understood that later we would be unable to see each other regularly.

Finally, my mother knew what she needed, that I had to be sent to the central highland of Vietnam. She did not know any of the places, whose names were not only strange but also difficult to read. Being sorrowful for her unfortunate fate and her unlucky boy, she knew nothing but crying. I tried consoling her, saying that not all of the soldiers had to be killed in the war and that I would be alive and come back safely. However, on the day I left my family my mother dared not to see me off. I came to my first troop with deep feelings about motherly love.

The first day living and working with a new troop were full of embarrassment. The mountainous places were strange to me, a person who lived in the delta. The communication between people who spoke the same language but different accents was very funny. Weather, climate, food, and even ways of life were all different. However, by love and help of my combatant companions, I joined in the new life easily. The first operations were full of impressions and worries. I realized that what I had studied in the school was just a theory and experiences that had been changed by blood were very necessary for a soldier to be safe and alive. It seemed that I was born to be a soldier. A short time after, I surprised my comrades by my bravery, my agility, and even my capacity when my unit made contact with the enemy. Gradually, I won their confidence, their hearts, and their sympathies. They did not look at me doubtfully anymore but gave me both love and respect.

Day after day, I lived in constant danger and deprivation to keep the peace for everybody. However, they never knew that while they were living happily with their beautiful wives and their lovely children in comfortable houses, we the soldiers were assaulting, throwing ourselves on the ground, jumping amid sharp thorns, or crossing leech and mosquito-infested

swamps. They never imagined while they were drinking beer, one can after another, in nightclubs full of colorful lights and nice
looking girls, that we had just drunk the last draught of water that had been taken in a hurry from a pond, our eyes wide in the glare of steel weapons and blazing bullets. And they never knew that the money which they spent on one night was equal to our monthly wages.

Depressingly, we were misunderstood and convicted as murderers knowing nothing but killing. What was sympathetic and human in us usually was ignored. Soldiers are also human beings full of sentiments and loves. We loved our fatherland, our countrymen, and our companions. In our dangerous daily lives, we struggled together against the enemy. A cigarette shared between four companions or the last draught of water from a can was a familiar and beloved action among us. Have you ever known that an energetic fighting hand, clutching a gun against a shoulder with the forefinger glued to the trigger, might also plant a gun in the hard ground as a support for a serum bottle to be transfused into a companion's veins just a few minutes later? Have you ever seen a hand which had just coldly killed the enemy trembling on the comrade's artery? Have you ever witnessed the soldier's eyes, usually inflamed with bravery, being like those of an anxious mother watching the slightest changes on a wounded friend's face? Have you ever known that a fighting man who, in spite of being exhausted, still dragged his wounded companion through the mud under showers of bullets. And a soldier -- kind and lovely -- might shield his commanding officer from bullets with his own body. Those things happened every day and everywhere quietly. The Vietnamese soldiers bore suffering and pain without complaint. We were born among common people like all of the others, and we dared to do those actions not to become heroes, but because we were people with hearts and brains. We did not demand the others' gratitude or pity, but we only wanted them to know how hard and dangerous our jobs were.

Being a soldier and also a leader, I did all my best to achieve my duty. Simultaneously, I received the soldier's duties and the leader's responsibilities. I always told myself that hundreds of soldiers' lives, and their families' depended on my cleverness, my leadership, and my command. When one soldier died, his whole family would be suffering. Naturally, the casualties in any battle were unavoidable, but I always tried to minimize them to the extent I could. Mistakes and experiences in battlefields had to be paid by the blood of my companions -- and even my own.
A military commander who only knew how to order was a dictator, but if he were just a person full of sentiments, he could not succeed in his military life. Lives of the soldiers who had sacrificed themselves for their fatherland had to be safeguarded reasonably. Their heroic achievements had to be rewarded worthily and their rights had to be served completely. I was very proud for what I had thought and done in eight years in the army.

My military life -- constantly hard and dangerous -- was ended on April 30, 1975, when the Vietnamese Communists took over South Vietnam. I had devoted eight years of my life to the army for eight years in "reeducation camps" and ten years in a "new economic region." The 23 medals that I had been proud to wear before became the distinct proofs of "crimes against the people and the country." Even though my job ended in sadness and disgrace, and even though I was a "puppet" or worse in the winner's eyes, I was still very proud of having been a soldier.

Flex

by Rob Candage

I hope you can visualize the bodybuilding competition I went to at the Beigel Theater on Brandeis University's campus. We finally got to our seats in the auditorium. My expectations of the stage looked different. The curtains looked like they were going to fall. That stage floor looked grungy and needed to be swept. The stage floor and curtains were both black, but not like an onyx black. The color was like a faded pair of black jeans. The curtains were faded because of the dust. The other bad thing I didn't like was the seats. They had to have been built for people under six feet. My legs had to have taken up about three seats. My back was so stiff that every time I stood up, I had to stretch out my back because of the position I sat in through the show.

The judges were sitting in front of the stage at a table with fruit and water for their appetite or thirst. The announcer, who looked like he wanted to work out but never went to the gym, was delaying the show. He had the audience waiting for over an hour before the show began. When the show finally started, the first people to compete were the women. The first women on stage got in a single line and faced the judges. The announcer asked them to do a few poses together. This is when you see the difference in size and what body part is defined more than someone else's. After a few poses, each of them got the stage to herself. The strength these women had was shocking. One woman walked off the stage on her hands. Another was doing flips and other gymnastic routines. The bad thing about the women was that they were so masculine-looking that they looked ugly.

The women had only three classes: junior, middleweight, and heavyweight. In the middleweight class there were only two contestants, so the judges had it easy on that class. The women in the heavyweight class had to have weighed 170 pounds or more. They looked very masculine because of their body structure. Everyone that competed had tan cream on. They all rubbed on this tan cream because it helped define the muscles on their bodies.

When the men came on, the crowd went nuts! The people in the audience were practically standing on their seats screaming, clapping, and whistling so loud you couldn't hear the announcer speak. The first male bodies on the stage were the kids in high school. Their routine was simple only because they were new at this. The one thing I could say about the teenage group is that they started the men's group off well by pumping up the crowd. One kid flexed and moved closer to the judges at every sound of the drum's beat. Being only eighteen and dedicating your life to the gym almost every day is indeed commitment and discipline at their finest.

The next class was the light heavyweight. There were so many competitors that the judges had to split them up into two groups. The first group of lightweights got into a single line like they always would. The problem started with one person

that had to leave the stage because of dehydration. He first started wobbling on the stage. The announcer at one time asked if he was all right. The sportsmanship was excellent; therefore, you heard people in the audience calling his number to keep him awake and alert. The other problem was still space, even after they split the group up. When the judges needed to see their arms, the men on stage would bump arms so they would have space to flex for the judges. After the two portions of competitors had been judged, it was time for the routine part of the show to begin. Most of the routines pertained to robotics movement. The competitors would move their arms to the music in a smooth rhythm, like a robot would.

The routine that I liked the most was the competitor who won first place. The lights went out and the music started. The lights came back on and a man was standing in the middle of the stage with his two arms flexed in the air. The audience went into a frenzy of cheers and screams. He even did back flips! He was defined and thick, and his build and symmetry could not be matched by any other competitors. If you watch television, you know who Mr. Clean is. If you took Mr. Clean's head and stuck it on this body builder then you know what he looked like. His enthusiasm on stage was what got the people out of their seats. He always was able to put his best body parts in front of the judges' table to earn him first place. The time he spent in the gym was well worth it.

After the men's routines were over, we decided to go home. The thing that shocked me the most was when I was leaving. The people on stage were short! All of them had to have been no bigger than 5'6" in height. I thought when they were on stage they were taller than six feet, but they were just "shredded midgets." On our way out I got a bottle of water and said to myself that I was going to the gym tomorrow, which never happened to me because I am too busy. Seeing how good the people on stage looked made me think. If I could have an hour a day to go to the gym then I could look just as good as they do in a year's time.

An Amazing Life

by Mary Clark

She has got to be the most intensely interesting person I have ever met. Describing her is a real challenge. Her name is Madeleine Jane Woodworth.

When I first met her a few months ago, she had thistle pink hair, wild and standing straight up, styled the way a punk rocker would wear it. The sunglasses she wore were rather strange, with a silver rim. Actually, the sunglasses reminded me of alien goggles. The blouse she was wearing was black and red, with a pair of pink hands sewn on the back. When she stood with her back to me it looked like someone was hugging her. Her shorts were a bright orange with a lime green hand on each buttock. There was an adage scrolled in big black letters: CAN'T TOUCH THIS. My first impression of her was "My God, what a nut!"

Although I felt reluctant about meeting her, I was obligated to talk to her because I was the process checker in the area where we both worked. My responsibility was to check the quality of everyone's work, including hers. I walked up and introduced myself, "Hi, my name is Mary Clark. I'm your process checker. I'll be checking your work."

Then she smiled. It was the brightest. Even her eyes smiled. "Good, good, that's good. My name is Hoppy. Nice to meet you." When she reached for my hand, I couldn't help but notice the half black and hot pink nail polish on each nail on both of her hands. I was also impressed by her mannerisms. She seemed to be scrutinizing my every word.

The experience of meeting Hop was pleasant. This bizarre personality was intriguing me. Was this the same person everyone called "a fruitcake on fire"? The question I had to have answered was: Is she crazy or isn't she?

Our conversation seemed fluent and comfortable. I found myself asking her many questions. Her character was so interesting and the funny thing was she really didn't seem to mind. Perhaps we could become friends. I asked, "How long have you been working here?"

She replied, "Long enough, too long. Going on fifteen years. Hopefully by the year 2001, I can retire. I'll have the age and service to collect a pension." We both had about the same amount of service at AT&T.

Did I dare to ask how old she was? I did. "How old are you?"

Her answer: "Old enough. Let's just say I'm in my mid-forties." She went on to tell about her marriage and how it was bad. "That life doesn't exist; I've done my time and got out. Let's not spend too much time on the smallest part of my life, my marriage." As quickly as she started the subject of her marriage, the story ended. There was a strange sadness in her eyes.

My next question was "Why do they call you Hoppy?"

She replied, "I had a serious automobile accident that broke my leg. The

doctor had me on crutches and I used to hop everywhere. The other employees started calling me Hop." With the brightest of smiles she said, "I like that name too."

I couldn't help but notice her toolbox depicting beautiful pictures of wildlife. I said, "These are wonderful pictures. Do you travel a lot?" She was at her she machine and I was standing by her table, located about two feet from the machine. She came over to the table and put her hand on the box like it was some kind of treasure chest. You just knew there was a lot of sentiment behind the pictures on the box.

Looking at the box, she replied, "Yes, I love adventure travel. I hope to go to many more places, too. I've been to Egypt, Africa, Maui and Kuaii. I've done quite a bit, and gone many places. My youngest daughter Ruth goes with me. We love to go on safaris to study the wonders of our wilderness. The best places to go for wilderness were Alaska and Africa."

Hop has seen live predatory animals like lions and tigers, elephants, and alligators. She says she has been more than once dangerously close to these animals. She went on to say, "I like to hike, mountain climb, scuba dive, horseback ride, and travel to any part of the world where I can get the most out of these things, too."

I said, "You know, Hop, most people don't know you and I'm glad we had this conversation. You certainly are an amazing person."

"I've never really put much importance on being liked because I don't like most people, although I already find knowing you a pleasure. People are too complex. I pretty much keep to myself. I just want to get to a point in my life where I can say I've done all the things I wanted to do. I don't want to say, 'I wish I had done that.' I was the first to start boogie boarding on North Hampton Beach. I also love canoeing."

She went on to tell me more about herself. Hoppy loves adventure and living dangerously. She seems to be a person who at one time had no freedom. Now that Hop has found that freedom, she has learned how to value every moment by living each second to its fullest.

Today, she now has flaming red hair and wears metallic purple spandex pants. Hop's attire has pretty much remained unchanged. As you can tell, she is still the warmest, most open personality I've ever met. I find her truly an inspirational and intriguing human being. I have learned that you truly must go beyond what you see to inherit the real benefit of knowing someone who just might become the nicest person to know. Hoppy taught me a person can be different, and that's what makes it such an interesting world.

Where He Sleeps

by Brooke Laughlin

The essence of a place is created by the people who live there. Appearances never tell the whole truth, the people do.

In a tiny room, in a small run down apartment, lies a troubled little boy, trembling in the darkness like an infant rabbit separated from its mother. As the bass of the music booms from the adjacent room and the stench of marijuana and alcohol filter into his, he cries silently into his pillow, afraid his mother will hear. If she does hear he knows that no kind words will be whispered lovingly into his ear, only the words of an irate drunk.

From the outside this place looks like a low-class apartment, but it seems to be decorated with a touch of love. A flowered welcome mat at the door and well kept plants hanging from the porch cause it to appear almost quaint. From the outside it looks like the house of a struggling single mother doing the best she can to care for her little boy, although appearances can mean nothing.

As you enter the house the soiled, beige carpet covers most of the floor. A torn, burlap couch is placed in the middle of the room, completely incoherent with its surroundings. A small black and white television is hoisted on two milk crates, probably stolen from a nearby store. A makeshift antenna is made of a coat hanger, which too is inoperative. On the table are a few children's books and a few lines of cocaine. Of course, there is a bottle of Jack Daniels under the couch and a three-foot bong hidden in the closet behind some clothes. Trash is everywhere, from empty cigarette packs to McDonald's cups. A window fan is in the sliding glass door to clear the room of smoke, but there isn't a strong enough fan to freshen this room.

The only bedroom holds a single sized bed with no sheets and a pillow with the stuffing popping out of the side. To the right of it is a mattress thrown on the floor, with Sesame Street sheets and blanket. That's where he sleeps, he cries.

As the mother sits on the couch smoking cigarettes and dope, her many boyfriends flood in and out. The only requirement she has of a boyfriend is that he be a drug dealer, so that he can get her high. Then he can take what he wants. She always wears the same pink sweatpants and bleached shirt. Her makeup is haphazardly applied to an unwashed face. Drugs, parties, and music are her life, and men if they can supply one of the above.

The men with gruff voices and unshaven faces stroll in and out of her life--and the child's. They wear long-sleeved shirts, even on the warmest of days, to cover their life's story, the monkey that has scarred their arms.

The little boy's innocent eyes have seen far more than any child his age should have. He knows to run and hide under the covers when voices are raised, for soon objects will be thrown and mother beaten. That's the only time she shows him any affection. When she's bruised and bloody she curls up next to him crying and promising that things will get better. He knows not to believe because the same words replay themselves too often with no results.

Another day, another week, his muffled cries will never be answered. He promises he will be different than she and every day grows to resent her more for the life with which she has plagued him. Unfortunately, with nowhere to turn, he will be just like her. He will live in the same prison of addiction he so vehemently swore off. This place is filled with secrets that torment the child. No one would realize that this outwardly cozy apartment is filled with so much pain -- pain caused by the people who reside there.

Tim's World of Music

by Jessica Howard

Many questions run through my head when I hear the music composed by my friend Tim. I find myself wanting to know everything about his life involving music. I did learn many reasons for his ability and interests by spending time with him; however, there were still some unanswered questions. I was anxious to ask them so I could lean more of what inspires him to play.

One day I sat down, and finally asked questions one by one. I was afraid, at first, that he would be bothered by this, but it turned out that he had a lot to say. I asked him how old he was when he started playing the piano. He answered by saying "I started at the age of nine. I mostly taught myself, but I have taken a few lessons." I also wondered who his influences were, and what styles of music he enjoyed most. He said "I love to listen to a lot of classical music. My favorite composers are Rachmaninoff, Liszt, Beethoven, and Mozart. I love their speed. They are incredibly intense, and they have had a tremendous influence on me." Something else that I have always wondered is if he hears the music before he plays. He replied with a smile, "I usually do, although there are times when my playing occurs from the mere response of my hand acting off the previous note played. I don't know exactly how or why this happens, but it does happen." I laughed in amazement, and I told him how I had never known anyone else who explains it that way; beyond that, I held a great amount of respect for the fact that he was even aware of such intricate details in the style of his playing.

I've seen him play many times, but I do remember a specific time when he was playing. I was watching everyone's response, and the change of the environment when he started to play. This particular event took place in my living room. There were many people there. Some of the people had known Tim all their lives. Some had never even met him. When he began to play, the living room changed from a mass of individual conversation, blending into a distant hum of voices, into a room full of individual expressions reacting to the music they were hearing and the sight they were witnessing. The speed of his fingers was blinding. Sometimes it was hard to tell if he was actually pressing down on the keys from how fast he was playing. It looked as if his hands were merely floating over the keyboard. His body rocked back and forth, changing with the dynamics of the different phrases. He would always lean back during the more intense part of the melody. His mouth hung slightly open, with a tiny lift at the corners, forming a confident smile. His whole body interacted with his playing. He tapped his feet according to the beat, while one hand would systematically wave through the air, and the other hand would run up and down the keyboard. As this happened, people's reactions differed among the crowd. Some eyes were closed and relaxed.

Some eyes were wide open, gazing intently at his movements. Some people were smiling from the acceptance of how amazing he was. I noticed that some were laughing from disbelief, eventually quieting down, realizing that the music they were hearing and the sight they were witnessing was actually happening. Another situation which caught my attention was the reaction of those who have grown up with Tim. It seemed as though they had just accepted his ability as being a part of each of their lives, and therefore, went about their original conversation, and treated the music as a comforting sound of the past in the background.

There is another time that had an incredible impact on a certain crowd. It took place four years ago. Tim played a special piece for the graduation at my old high school, Greater Boston Academy. He played in the gymnasium of the school, which is where the commencement service was held. The gym was packed full of students, parents, families, and friends. Almost everyone there knew of Tim's talent on the piano; however, I don't think they realized at the time how truly gifted he was and is. His piece lasted for minutes. Not one sound was made during his performance, and as I looked around, every eye was staring at him. Even little kids were standing on their tiptoes so they could see where this beautiful music was coming from. His song was played with speed and accuracy. It was extremely powerful. As soon as Tim had completed his piece, the whole audience literally jumped out of their seats, cheering and applauding from excitement and amazement!

The people who have been exposed to Tim's music have learned a lot involving music, and the way music coincides with individual emotions. His mannerisms while playing have proven his love for expression through music, and have also influenced his audiences. He does this by bringing the public together in fellowship, linking them up through music which has the power to connect and touch souls. All of this talent we have been fortunate to witness has come from one who did not necessarily excel scholastically, but the music composed by Tim has only seemed to underscore the sweetness of his talent.

Manhunt!

by Robin Robinson

If you are one of the many thousands of women who wants to date a man who is successful and financially well off, I can suggest a place where you might find one.

One place I find to be the most encouraging is the men's department in an exclusive clothing store, during lunch hours. Doctors, lawyers, and judges usually shop when they're on lunch because they're so busy during the day.

My advice would be to get all dolled up: wear a nice skirt suit, double breasted, in blue with white pin stripes with no shirt -- that is sharp! Jewelry should consist of a necklace, a watch, and a dainty bracelet; make sure you wear a medium to high heel shoe. Women look sexier when they wear high heel shoes. This gives an illusion of shape to the body, in places where one might need it. Don't forget the hair and make up. You should wear your hair so that it gives frame to your face. Don't wear heavy make up; you don't want a gentlemen wondering how scary you might look with out it. Remember, you're selling yourself, so you can draw men to you who have money. You don't want a clown who wants you to be in the circus with him.

When you have accomplished the above, it's time to find a store where you'll be shopping for your man. Try to make it a day when there's a sale on men's clothing. Newbury Street would be the best pick! Oh honey, you'll find it all there. Especially when you're walking past the cafes, you'll see the men drinking espresso while chatting with colleagues over business deals. The shop, Louis, on Berkeley Street, would be a good place to start. Oh, don't forget the wedding band: if you see a man with a wedding band on his finger, don't you dare do it, no matter how desperate you are. You'll only be his dessert, for his main course is his wife. Think about how often one eats dessert when he's full from eating a full course meal.

First look in the window to see if there are any men shopping, then straighten out your shoulders, gather your thoughts and say to yourself, "He's mine!" and go for it. Walk in the store. There will be a sales person available to you immediately. Kind of brush him or her off, and tell the sales person that you're just looking. Then start looking at ties, shirts, and other items in the same area in which he's looking. After a moment or so, say to him, "Excuse me, I was wondering, would you be caught dead in this tie? I'm trying to pick out a tie for my brother's birthday, and I was wondering, would you have any suggestions?" He'll probably laugh and then offer his advice.

After he replies, make a comment on something that he's wearing. Tell him how attractive his tie is or how nice his cologne smells. After a general conversation ask him if he is familiar with any of the restaurants in the area, and then invite him out to lunch.

Well, now that you have your man it's up to you to keep him. Always keep him guessing and wanting more. Oh yeah! And never let him go shopping by himself.

Living With A Single Mom

by Andrea Whalen

Having to live with a single mom is not always the easiest thing to do. They expect a lot from you, and they depend on you more often than anyone else. There are many ways to cope and handle frustrating situations when they occur. I've written down some things that might interest you that I've experienced in the past. Here's how to live with a single mom.

The one thing you need as a daughter of a single mom is patience. Without patience your mother daughter relationship is in danger. Don't yell at your mother because you don't like something she does. Don't let the littlest things bother you. There is so much more in life to worry about. When my mother had the television too loud or when we are trying to go out and she's taking so long to get ready, I simply take a deep breath. Don't make a big deal out of it, because someday you might do the same. For example, when I clean the house I like the counters clear with nothing on them. My mom, on the other hand, leaves all her bills laid out on the counter and I hate it, so I move them or put them all together. When she goes to look for a bill, she has a hard time finding it. When I leave things on the counter like my bills, keys, or books, and she decides to clean, I'm the one who is searching to find them.

If your mom does something to help you but makes it worse by mistake, be thankful that she was willing to help you. Not too long ago, my mom put my computer file in our word processor, hoping it would come up on our screen and not knowing it was going to erase the work that I had done. I was upset, but felt even worse for her because I knew she was only trying to help me, so I said thank you and gave her a kiss, biting my tongue as I turned around.

Any single mother needs to feel important. Tell her she looks good once in a while, compliment her on what she's wearing for the day or how you like her hair. Tell her how thin she looks. Your mom needs to feel good about herself. If she doesn't, she will lack self confidence and feel bad about herself, calling herself ugly and fat. Single moms tend to feel miserable about themselves and think in negative ways. Remember, there's no one there except for you to take control of this situation. Once in a while, bring home a card or flowers, letting her know she's still appreciated. It makes her feel that even though she has her faults you can still accept her. I do this all the time and it works. It makes her feel acknowledged, appreciated, and worthy.

Doing these little things doesn't have to be costly. You can go to a computer and design your own card and write the words you want to say. For example, you could write: Thank you for making my lunch, have a great day,

I love you, or, if necessary you could find a way to say "I'm sorry." My mom always tells me, "It's the thought that counts."

If your mom works, most likely she likes to come home to a clean house. At least, my mom does. Help her clean the rooms in the house, like the kitchen, living room, or bathrooms. Even if it's just vacuuming. It's one less thing she has to worry about. I think the first floor is the most important because that's what she sees when she walks in the door. If she sees a glass where it doesn't belong, she might get frantic, thinking the whole house is a mess. To prevent her from being in a bad mood, just pick it up and place it in the dishwasher. Just think, you're the one that has to hear her yell, even if it's not your fault.

If you see her in a rush and you're not doing anything, offer her your help. Helping her can release stress and tension before it becomes a problem. Even if it's the simplest thing like starting her car or getting all the things she needs together and putting them by the door, it's helpful, and she'll be thankful for it.

If you see you have no food in the house, don't panic. Write a note letting her know the kinds of foods you want her to buy. If you know she's low on cash, it doesn't hurt to pick up a few things for her. Think about all the money she may have spent on you in the past years; maybe that will change your perspective. I think a lot of times when you're angry and want to yell, writing a note to her is less hurtful. No mother likes to hear her daughter yell at her for any reason. It makes her feel like you have no respect for her.

Being understanding is an important fact. When your mom is moody and stressed about a job, this is the time she needs you the most. Remember, there's not a special guy there to talk to. She may not have much to say, but being there to help her with the little problems, or just to listen to her, means a lot. Give her advice like she would give you advice, telling her to take one day at a time, or everything happens for a reason, or have a positive attitude. Doing this can bring a single family together, and it makes a mother know you care what happens to her during her everyday life. That's important.

Everybody gets lonely sometimes, but for a single mom, it can be harder than for others. They like to have some sort of company. It makes them feel not so alone. My mom enjoys it when I make her dinner and we sit down as a family. No matter how busy a mom is, she always enjoys spending quality time with her daughter. You don't have to spend all weekend or every night with your mom, but spend at least two nights a week with her. Rent a movie, go out to eat, or just sit around and talk. This will let her know that she's still important in your life and that she hasn't been forgotten.

Encourage your mom to go out and socialize. Tell her to go to singles dances or clubs and bring a friend along. Meeting new people will make her feel she's not the only one out there being alone and single.

Yes, of course there will be arguments and disagreements, but this is not a reason for you not to talk to your mother. A lot of times when my mother and I fight, I always yell, "But Mom, I love you." For some reason, this makes things better. When I know things are my fault, it's hard to say sorry. Instead, I give her a hug and tell her, "Don't be mad at me." She knows this is my way of saying sorry. My mom has taught me never to leave the house angry and never to go to bed mad. Always go to the person and make amends. Life is too short to go around angry wither the people you love most.

No two people do things exactly alike, but if you learn to overlook the faults your mom might have, you will find you're really much alike in many ways. Living with a single mom can turn into the best experience. I know because I'm living with one.

A Bridal Shower To Remember

by Rhonda Messina

I have attended many bridal showers. This is my way to take you through the process of planning or preparing a great one. If I decided to plan a bridal shower, I would think that I would need a lot of time to get everything prepared. This is my way of explaining the process of events that you will need to fulfill.

If you are planning a bridal shower, the first step you should take for preparing the shower is make up a guest list. You should always get together with the bride's mother to make the list and see who would and who would not be a candidate to attend. Always invite every lady relative and friend. I would keep the little ones at home. You should try to keep the list under fifty people. Then you can go ahead and pick out the invitations and buy them. I always shop at Hallmark gift shops because they have absolutely everything you could possibly need for a party or shower. I find it difficult to choose which invitation I like the best because I like them all.

Timing is very important when you're planning a shower. Make sure that you set the date approximately two to three months prior to the wedding. If you wait too long you might not be able to reserve a hall so always plan ahead. Once you have a general idea of how many people will attend you can start searching for the right size hall to rent. I would suggest that you always rent the biggest hall you can find and make sure the location of the hall is one everyone can get to. You want to reserve the hall at least six months ahead. I suggest a nice quiet hall all by itself, like a V.F.W. or a function hall inside a hotel. I went to a shower once where it was on one side of the restaurant and the people could see you and you could hear the people, which I thought was tacky. I also suggest that you plan the shower to take place on a Sunday afternoon, because some people might have to work on a Saturday afternoon. A nice touch would be to surprise the bride-to-be because I think it is touching to see her get all emotional. Obviously she will be expecting a shower, but she does not have to know when or where.

After you have reserved the hall then you can go out and buy the decorations. In addition to the standard party items like balloons, banners, confetti, flowers and knickknacks for the tables a suggestion would be to provide each guest with a little memento, such as magnetic refrigerator bonnets or candy favors.

Usually the mother of the bride-to-be is the one who is picking up the tab for most of the preparations. Anybody can participate with the decorating and that is usually what happens. Whoever wants to volunteer usually does get put to work. I like the idea of each of the guests bringing a little something to help fill the bride's kitchen cabinets, such as cleaning agents, pot holders, or canned food.

The next step would be to decide on whether or not you want the food to be catered. It is a lot of work to make most of the food on your own even if you have

some of the guests bring something that they made with them. But it is a nice idea to have an assortment of foods. You have to remember that making the food on your own is time consuming and a tough task because you also have to make different types of foods to please your guests. I would suggest that you have the food catered because it is less work for everybody (though you do not want to hire the first caterer you find). Search around by looking in the yellow pages of your phone directory and do not be afraid to ask questions. You could also ask for recommendations from a friend or two. Always try to negotiate with the prices and find out exactly what they can do for you with discounts, service, quality, and quantity. Caterers can run up a gigantic bill if you are not cautious. The benefit of catering is that it comes with waitresses that will serve you unless you like the idea of a buffet. I recommend buffet style catering. The guests can help themselves to as much or as little as they want, and it costs less than having waitresses serving the food.

I always thought that surprising the bride-to-be with an old grammar school friend that she has not seen in many years would top off the day. Actually if you could dig anything up from a bride's past that will totally shock her and bring a tear of joy to her eye then you have succeeded. Do not forget about your guests who want to win that centerpiece. There are many games you could play to try to win it such as passing the buck or musical chairs, which is fun and exciting.

After the invitations have been mailed it is good to double check the reservations for the hall, the reservations with the caterer, including the menu choices, and with any other friends or vendors that are helping you. Planning ahead, attention to detail, and the proper preparation will all help to ensure that your bridal shower will be something to remember. When the exciting day happens and turns out to be a success make sure you take all the credit for it.

Teen Pregnancy

by Chantal Chunilal

Teen pregnancy is on the rise. Children even as young as eleven years old are getting pregnant. Because young kids have teenage parents, they are not educated the way they should be. How can teenagers who don't even have money or the knowledge for life give their children what they need to grow? Most teenagers don't even have enough for themselves, and they think they are going to have enough for their babies. These teenagers think they know about love and that having sex is love. These babies didn't ask to be born to a mother who is too young to vote and doesn't even know where the father is. What right does a person have to bring a baby into the world because he or she didn't want to use protection? These babies deserve a good life and an educated one. If teens today would try harder to educate themselves about life, then maybe they would realize that having sex won't help them to have a secure future. We should focus more on educating teens not to have children.

Teens should stop thinking about only themselves and think about the child's future. Most of the teen dads don't even stay around, because they are babies themselves. They don't realize the responsibility or know how to deal with it. Then there goes the family life that a child needs for healthy development. My friend has a son who is two years old. She shares an apartment with another girl. When her son was born, she was only sixteen. Until recently, when the new welfare regulations came into effect, she was on welfare getting six hundred dollars a month and food stamps. They also helped her pay rent. The reason why I feel bad for her son is because my friend still wants to be a teen and do all the things people of that age do. When you have a child, you have to give up a lot of things and accept the responsibility. Teenagers need to speak to other teens who have kids. Hearing how quickly they have to grow up and act like an adult, even though they are still young, would probably scare them. They have to think about their children now, instead of themselves. I get so mad when my friend smokes pot in front of her son with a bunch of guys. The father of her son doesn't even care. He is not even around. Her son breathes the smoke from pot. Sometimes I'll say "What if there is an emergency and you have to take him to the hospital?"

"Then I will just take him like this," she says. When she drives around with her friends in the car, they smoke blunts with the windows up. There is no air in the car and her son is in the backseat with no seatbelt on. My friend is a perfect example of why teenagers are too young to have babies.

Having guest speakers come into classrooms at schools would be of help. When I was a freshman in high school, there was a young teenage girl who came to speak to the class. She talked to us about teen pregnancy. Some of the girls in the class couldn't believe the things they heard. She went into detail about how hard it

really is to raise a child. It is not always as easy as one might think. I think that guest speaker really did a good job of educating the class about having kids. Most of the girls changed their minds about how they felt. It's very scary when you are a teenager and you hear the real deal about raising kids. Parents of teens should let their teens know that having kids when they are kids themselves is not acceptable behavior. The reason I say this is because I have a friend who just gave birth at 17. Her mom was happy when she found out her daughter was pregnant. She said she wanted to be a grandmother. Now my friend can't attend college like she was planning on doing. Having to grow up ahead of time and not being able to do the things you want to do doesn't seem like a life to me. When you have kids, you have to understand that giving up part of your life is what is needed. The teenagers are not old enough to realize this. They don't accept the responsibilities because they really don't know what the responsibilities are.

If teens were more educated about sex in health class and by parents, maybe they would not think that is all there is in life. Parents supporting their feelings about being against teen pregnancy might help to overcome the problem. If more parents of teens would feel this way maybe teenagers wouldn't feel so free about doing what they want and having babies. There is a lot of ignorance from teens who don't want to realize what they are doing is wrong. Teens must realize who they are affecting by their actions and what can happen. When I was in high school, I had these three friends who I always hung around with. All three of them had kids while in high school. Almost every day I would argue in a friendly way about how upset I was with them. I always told them when I thought they were doing something wrong in raising their children. They listened to what I had to say, but I know they didn't change their minds.

School funds for health class are and were tight, especially when I was in high school. I feel there should always be money for sex education programs in school. Sometimes the board of education doesn't understand that students learn a lot in health class. When there are teens who feel embarrassed to ask questions about their bodies or about protection, they can go to the teacher in health class. If more funds were established for continuing health class in high school, then we could try to prevent teens from getting pregnant. Education is the key. Parents have to be good role models for their teens and let the children know that they can come to them with anything they are feeling. Open up to your teenager and discuss the pros and cons of having sex. Parents and teachers should help to stop teen pregnancy by education.

Learning Above and Beyond, From Below and Beneath

by Russell Barbeau

Life is full of learning experiences. Even though school is set up to be the "ideal" learning environment for the masses, my school learning was more a collection of situational experiences rather than conventional classroom education. Slipping by seemed to be what was expected of me and what I expected of myself. I didn't always fare well in school and I didn't consistently do badly either. Outside the conventional classroom I gained a great deal of knowledge beyond my years and I certainly did my homework for it.

I remember distinctly, it was a bright warm winter day. The only cold around was what radiated from the snow. The playground was too small for us to play in. When there were snow mountains, it was reduced to half size. "Stay off the snow!" the teachers doing yard duty would bellow during recess. I couldn't understand it. There was water running everywhere as the snow melted. Little trickles formed small streams and puddled in the low areas. The school yard wasn't plowed from the last night's storm and where the water wasn't running, the wet slush saturated everything. The driest place was on top of the snow.

Wet or dry was not the issue in my fourth grade mind. Playing was the rule of thumb and fun appeared to be something one would have to sneak to get. "Stop that running," I heard thundering behind me as I looked over my shoulder to ensure it wasn't me being singled out. Sure enough, I slipped by again and off like a shot I went. Falling was commonplace and in the snow it was loads of fun. Pushing and jostling were part of the exciting ritual.

There was a four-foot fence that surrounded the yard at the John K. Tarbox School in Lawrence, Mass. The fence was old and rusty and bulged from the strain the snow bankings pressed upon it. Many of the snow mountains were twice the fence's height. The snow bankings were like a chain of mountains with highs and lows, surging in every direction. Sometime during the morning recess I stopped running and stood upon one of the many pinnacles to rest and warm my hands from the wet, cold snow. While standing there away from the ever moving crowd with my hands in my jacket pockets, I was bumped from behind. My foot plunged through the lower, softer snow from the hard tall mound on which I stood. My hands seemed stuck in my jacket pockets as I plummeted toward the outskirts of the yard. The pocket liner material clung to my wet hands. They wouldn't come out. It happened so fast. My face drove toward the fence. I screamed in pain as my head hung on the barb on top of this chain link retainer. Every movement, every twist deepened the wound beneath the skin that was driven from my lower mid cheek to just below my left eye. My body was now lower than the fence as I dangled there

scrambling to my feet. My hands still caught in my jacket pockets made it difficult to retreat from the pain. The pain escalated. I frantically fought for freedom. The moments it took to free my hands equated to the eternity it took to free my head from the barb's grasp. Blood was everywhere. I held my face with both hands. Screaming, I threw myself around in the snow. I couldn't get away from the pain. Someone helped drag me over the crimson snow. I don't remember how I got to the nurse's office or the hospital. My face, hands and clothing were covered with blood. I heard people say, "He's lost his eye." I was barely lucid.

I vaguely remember a lecture on the evils of running and being on top of the snow bank from some asinine figure heads that wouldn't stop repeating themselves. The lecture only heightened my contempt and dislike for those in such positions. I was somewhere between shock and hysteria. I just wanted relief from the pain. This was one lesson I'd never repeat.

The facial scar is almost diminished, hidden behind the aging lines that take precedence. The emotional scars are not as obvious yet run deeper. For years I thought if I hadn't been there in school with partial compliance that day I would have learned all about the diversity of snow, watching one's own back, and the hazards of precarious positioning without the pain I endured.

School doled out a good measure of grief and pain and I didn't always like being there. Yet there were lessons to be learned, and again the source wasn't always the conventional classroom. I was in the sixth grade. Mr. Robert Mason was the teacher of more than thirty students. I had the honor of being one of them in the same John K. Tarbox School. It was another flop and plop day. I had no real motivation to learn. I didn't fare well in school at this time. I didn't even know how to study history. We were to have a test the following day and I was unprepared. On this particular day I was staying after school for detention and Mr. Mason was the monitor. The detention was probably for fighting. I was constantly defending myself from the older, larger bullies, which made school not just frustrating but dangerous.

Near the end of the detention Mr. Mason must have had a brain storm. He called me to his desk and showed me how to get the main idea out of a paragraph. He used the first paragraph in the chapter and stated the main idea was going to be on the test. He guided me through the process of extracting the idea.

Detention had ended and I was impressed with how easy it was to study history. I don't remember how well I did on that test. I don't even remember if I continued to study the rest of the chapter. I do remember I got that one question right, and I was one of two or three that did. It felt really good when the teacher singled me out from the rest of the class in praise for my achievement. The one reward proved too late or too little. It probably added another wedge in the strained relations between some of my classmates and me.

I was brought into this academically lower level from across the hall where the so called smart kids were. The only class I now had with my former peers was

English. The rest of the time I was stuck with these ruffians. The move and the daily transition from one extremely prejudiced group to the other served to ostracize me from both. I walked alone across the hall and traveled back alone, more lonely than before.

Fighting continued and I had to figure out how to get along without getting beat up from these illiterates, some of them six and seven years my senior. There were many lessons to be learned that weren't on the curriculum. I became an A student in the extracurricular activity of wit and I learned that schooling as presented wasn't for me. My grades at the Tarbox dropped.

It's a wonder how I ever arrived at high school, still the youngest in the class and emotionally even younger. This high school was an experimental school. It had 20 minute modules instead of 45 minute periods and many other strange things. We were permitted to skip any particular class and specialize in whatever subject matter we chose as long as we got the assignments and did them. The choice was supposed to be from the curriculum. I diverted. I chose cafeteria and socialization.

With the excessive freedom allowed, I was free to fail in my classes and free to excel in my small social circle. I don't recall doing any homework except for a short period of time when I was impressed by and infatuated with a female student who got all A's and fancied seeing me. That brief higher calling became a pretty tall order -- too tall for me.

Boredom became the norm and I felt I was too far behind in my studies to get caught up. Smoking became one of the illegal pastimes. We were smoking in the boy's room. Many of us would line up on the inside wall that ran parallel to the 12 foot long entry hallway coming off the main corridor, watching, waiting, looking into the shiny tiles that reflected the brightly illuminated adjoining hall. The light cast slightly reflective darkened images into the opaque mirror like tiles in which we put our trust. We watched for the shadows we knew, the shadows of the hall monitors, the principal or any authority figure that could bust us as we dragged long and hard on our shared cigarettes.

One day, my friend Bob handed me a cigarette he and I were sharing. I hadn't been looking in the tiles because the wall wasf ull of people. There was no room for me. There was a lax atmosphere in the boy's room that day as we joked and gesticulated. Maybe it was because no one had been busted for a while. Maybe it was because the room was so full everybody thought someone else was watching. The room was full of smoke.

It must have poured out into the main corridor. I turned my back to the entry way and tipped my head forward just in case some authority burst through the smoke in a fury.

Looking at the floor I took a long hard drag, filling my lungs with smoke. I noticed cigarettes hitting the floor without warning, and feet began moving as though these shufflers were busted.

A quick glance revealed shiny oxfords facing the exiting crowd and they didn't belong to a student. One student was pulled aside. I flicked my cigarette into the urinal behind the shield of the exiting masses. I looked up and made eye contact with the principal now staring at me. Mine was a face he seldom saw. It was so by my own design. If he only had related my face to the name he had had paged every morning, I too would have been pulled aside and the course of my life may have turned right then.

School was a testing ground for all the students attending. This was my self induced test. I had to get an A. Nonchalantly slipping by was the key. My lungs were full of smoke. I needed to exhale. I watched him watch me trying to look casual, not breathing. Without saying a word I cut into the line just busted for loitering. I needed to put some people and space between the principal and me. I hurried to the corridor pushing my way through the strolling crowd. If I could only get around the corner out of his sight I could exhale, I thought. I was desperate for air, not desperate enough to get caught and suspended for smoking and not desperate enough for the principal to associate my all too familiar name with my face. We arrived in the corridor and faced the coach coming down the hall.

Without breathing I turned to see the assistant principal approaching fast from the other direction. I needed to breathe and not get caught. I turned again and entered a classroom with an ongoing class. I closed the door behind me and blew the smoke out, creating a cloud about my head. As the teacher turned from the blackboard I turned also and left him literally "in a cloud of smoke." Taking a short breath of precious air, I bolted through the door again. I ran holding my breath. "Slow down!" someone bellowed as I merged into the crowd to disguise my smoke-laden breath. As my heart was racing I strolled with the rest of the crowd to blend in. Finally, I caught my breath, laughing with my friends at the narrow escape, only to play that self destructive game again and again. I had beat the system. The cost was incalculable and insignificant to me at the time. I learned trickery and deception. I learned how people thought and reacted and how to get around them years before. The knowledge handed out its short term reward again. These were lessons in the art of survival. I was unaware there were better lessons to learn and better ways to acquire knowledge than what I had haphazardly and inconsequentially received.

If it were not for the mere detail of my recently having to seek information from those who were successful in the school system, I would still be biased against the entire educational system the way it stands today. The majority of my education derived from outside the school system. That may very well change.

About Our Contributors...

Russell Barbeau, 41, is the first Basic Writing student in recent memory to have been so thoroughly committed to the writing process that his 4-inch thick portfolio required its own hanging folder in the filing cabinet! A Mechanical Engineering major, he hopes to become an inventor. As a student of Suzanne Van Wert in Spring '96, he says that writing was always a challenge for him, but that the challenge is now on a higher level. When he is not being prolific, he works as a carpenter and enjoys hiking and other "endeavors in the woods.", He lives in Chelmsford.

Olivia Burton is a full-time student and mother from Haverhill. Before enrolling in Suzanne Van Wert's Basic Writing course in Spring '96, Libby says that she "felt pretty good about writing but never had the time to pursue it." Now, as a student in the Paralegal program, she finds time for all her intellectual pursuits and aspires to a career as a lawyer. In her leisure time, she enjoys writing and reading novels. (Perhaps another John Grisham in the making?!) She is 23.

Before taking the Basic Writing course, **Robert Candage**, 24, says that he "didn't like writing," but enjoys it now. A student of Joan Irons in Fall '95, Rob is a Business Management major who works as a chef and hopes to open his own restaurant. In his free time, he enjoys all sports, particularly weight training and basketball. He lives in Haverhill.

Madeline Casanova, 20, wrote her narrative "Fire!" only weeks after the event it details. A student in Lyn LeGendre's BW section in Fall '95, Madeline "hated" writing, but feels good about it now. By her own admission, being able to put pen to paper helped her to deal with the loss of her home and possessions. A Paralegal Studies major who hopes to pursue a career in law, Maddy lives with her daughter in Lawrence.

A resident of Lawrence, **Chantal Chunilal** says that she always enjoyed writing . After studying with Claudia Stern in Fall '95, she says that her confidence has been boosted significantly and she works even harder at putting her thoughts on paper. A Medical Language/Transcription major, she enjoys dance clubs and spending time with her family, fiancée and many pets. She is 18.

We're not sure how she does it, but **Mary Clark**, 39, somehow finds time to be a full-time student, mother and AT&T employee! A student of Claudia Stern in Fall '95, Mary says, "I've always privately found writing one of my favorite outlets to relax. I now find myself taking more pride in what I put on paper and am more eager to share my work than to hide it." A Liberal Arts major who hopes to pursue a career in Nursing, Mary enjoys music, watching people, and spending time with her "three wonderful children." She is married and lives in Haverhill.

Before her semester in Basic Writing, **Maria Deaven**, 51, says that when faced with a writing assignment, she "didn't know where to start." Now, after a semester studying with Claudia Stern in Spring '96, she feels "more confident." A Dental Lab technician, Maria enjoys gardening, ceramics, and nature activities. With her grown children gone from the nest, she lives in Haverhill with her husband.

Alexandra Diaz, 25, was worried when she enrolled in Barbara Stachniewicz's course in Spring '96. "I felt like I was going to need a lot of help," she says. "Now I feel great! Like I can write just about anything." A Dental Hygiene major, Alexandra hopes to continue on to Dental school. In her leisure time, she enjoys exercising and spending time with her two sons, John, 8, and Joshua, 2. She lives in Lawrence.

As the practice of Karate feeds his body and soul, **Steven Dionne** now knows that the practice of writing also requires diligence, persistence, concentration, and a good measure of faith. Coming into Suzanne Van Wert's class in Spring '96, Steve says, "I despised writing. I thought I didn't ever have anything important to say. Now, I feel more comfortable putting my thoughts into words. I'm getting more of an understanding of the whole writing process." A Teacher Prep major, Steve hopes to go on to teach on the elementary level. He is also a black belt in Karate and recently began teaching children's classes at the dojo where he practices. He is 24 and lives in Haverhill.

Maria Figuereo, 37, of Lawrence, is another full-time mother and student we have watched with amazement this year. A major in Computer Programming, Maria found time to care for her four children -- including four-year old twins -- and still manage to excel in her studies. As a student in Joanna Fortna's class in Fall '95, she says "I didn't feel comfortable with writing but I see that I have improved." Concerning leisure activities, she says, "I enjoy reading books and watching movies -- when I have time!"

"Before I took Basic Writing," says **Samara Hall**, "I thought I could not write if you paid me!" After having debunked her own theory as a student of Barbara Stachniewicz in Spring '96, she now feels "it's so exciting!" A 25 year old Methuen resident, she enjoys skiing and working with animals. Although undecided on her major, Samara hopes to do something "working with and for animals."

Although she has transferred to a Southern college since completing Joan Irons' course in Fall '96, none of us will easily forget the passion and enthusiasm for good writing that **Jessica Howard** brought through the Writing Center door. A 19 year old resident of Newbury, Jess says "I always loved to write. But after taking the class, I feel I have a better understanding of the organization and preparation of a formal assigned paper." Devoted to music, she plays the piano and sings, and also enjoys camping and sports.

Few students can boast with pride that one of their Basic Writing papers managed to effectively enthrall and turn the stomachs of the Writing Center staff: **Keith Kady** can. His vivid imagination and attention to details made his work come alive. A student of Lyn LeGendre in Fall '96, Keith loves to write, and his experience in Basic Writing deepened that love. A Computer Programming major, Keith enjoys restoring cars. He is 18 and lives in Exeter, N.H.

Despite vivid memories of the traumatic situation he describes in his narrative "A Ride to Remember," **Adam Lane**, 21, admits that he is an avid mountain biker! When he is not flying over handle bars or crashing into cars, he is pursuing a degree in Electronics. As a student in Joanna Fortna's course in Summer '95, Adam says that he "didn't mind" writing; he enjoys it more now. He lives in North Andover.

Brooke Laughlin was a student of Greg Mendonca's in Spring '96. She lives in Windham, N.H.

Van Tang Mac, 53, was a Vietnamese soldier during the war. The description of his duties gives a enlightening perspective -- puts a face -- on a story that few of us have had the opportunity to encounter. A student in Mike Wilcomb's section in Spring '96, he says that before taking the course, "It was very difficult to write an essay of any length -- I'm very happy now because I can express easily and orderly what I want to." Van works as a plater and enjoys soccer as a hobby. He lives in Lawrence with his wife.

In her moving narrative, "P.J.", **Melissa Marini**, 23, tells another version of a dramatic story that most Haverhill residents are familiar with -- the murder of P.J. Davis. Although the press covered the events, few stories captured the depth of the family's emotional pain -- this one does. As a student in Lyn LeGendre's class in Fall '95, Melissa says she was "nervous" about writing, but now feels better about it. A Haverhill resident, she is in the LPN program, and hopes to continue on into the Registered Nursing track. She enjoys art and spending time with her child.

Rhonda Messina entered the semester in Basic Writing with trepidation -- "I did not think that I had enough creativity to do well," she says. Surprisingly, spending the Spring '96 studying with Suzanne Van Wert not only made Rhonda, 21, a better writer: it gave her a career path! "I absolutely love writing now. I want to make a career out of it!" Now a student in the Journalism/Broadcasting degree track, she hopes one day to work in print journalism. A Methuen resident, Rhonda works as a bank teller. In her free time, she enjoys bingo, bowling, roller blading and walking.

Robert Ota lives in Andover. He was a student of Suzanne Van Wert in Summer '95.

In Basic Writing, it is always exciting to read the work of students who have "found their voice." Haverhill resident **Robin Robinson** is one of those -- her sentences are as filled with her cleverness and wry humor as her conversation is. As a student of Claudia Stern in Spring '96, she says that she felt that writing was always confusing. She feels great about the abilities she has gained this semester. A Biology major, Robin hopes to explore the field of Genetic Engineering. She counts writing, dancing, and science among her passions.

"Before the semester in Basic Writing," writes **Maria Romero**, 23, "I didn't like to write -- mainly because I was afraid and didn't know how to get my ideas in order. This course gave me confidence in writing and taught me the basics. I am not pleased with my ability and am willing to write." She as a student of Claudia Stern in Fall '95. A Library Assistant, Maria is pursuing a degree in Human Services, with an eye toward social work. A resident of Lawrence who enjoys dancing and art, she lives with her husband and daughter.

Basilia Rosario was a student of Faith Benedetti's Basic Writing class in Fall '95. She lives in Lawrence.

With dark eyes, a rich accent, and vivid prose redolent of smoke and the rhythmic slap of cards, **Cenk Tuncok** managed to bring some of the mystery and intrigue of Turkey to his Writing Center visits. A student of Priscilla Bellairs in Fall '95, Cenk is pursuing a degree in Computer Information Science. He works as a computer tutor in the college's Peer Tutor program. Although Cenk enjoys writing, his true passion is the game of Bridge -- he has won several national and international titles, and has recently opened a Bridge club in Exeter, N.H. and works as an instructor there. He is 24 and lives in Exeter.

Every now and then, a student comes along whose mere presence in the Writing Center brightens everyone's day immeasurably. **Shaun Watson** was a star in Claudia Stern's Spring '96 section, sharing his incredible light, warmth and effusive energy with all of us. Despite his work as an "illusionist," Shaun is one of the most real people many of us have ever met. A Commercial Art major, Shaun hopes to pursue a career in Graphic Design. In addition to his drag show, he also works as a part-time stylist at a Newbury Street hair salon in Boston. And what does he think of writing? In January, Shaun said "YUCK." Now, he responds with a resounding "YEAH!" A resident of Rowley, he refuses to tell us his age -- but he hints that he is old enough to remember Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" the first time it was a Top 40 hit.

A resident of No. Chelmsford, **Andrea Whalen** was a student of Terry Cargan in Fall '96. Of writing, she says, "I used to hate it. I didn't know what or how to write. After taking Basic Writing, I enjoy it better. I feel confident about my writing, especially with all the good feedback. It makes me want to do even better on the next assignment." Andrea is a Liberal Arts major, works part time as a Certified Nursing Assistant for Children, and enjoys dancing as a hobby. She is 18.

-- Faith Benedetti